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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MARCH 1979

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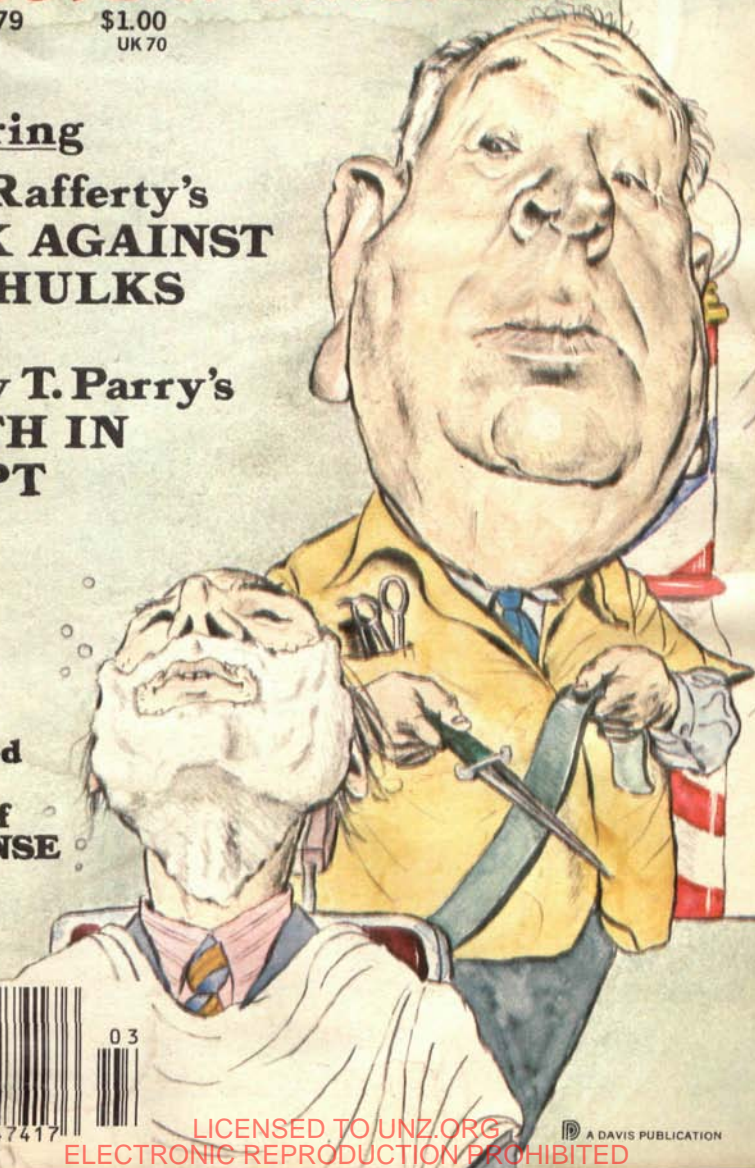
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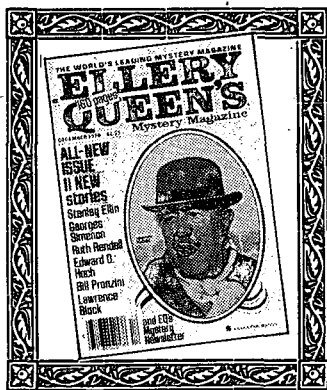
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VOLUME 24, NO. 3

MARCH 1979

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NEXT
ISSUE
ON SALE
MARCH 15

NOVELETTE

DEATH IN EGYPT *by Henry T. Parry* 97

SHORT STORIES

CORK AGAINST THE HULKS *by S. S. Rafferty* 5

THE APPEAL *by Barry N. Malzberg* 27

THE RIGHT CIRCUMSTANCES *by Robert Edward Eckels* 35

THE MUSIC FROM DOWNSTAIRS *by John Lutz* 46

MURPHY'S DAY *by Ernest Savage* 50

ROCK'S LAST ROLE *by William Bankier* 65

A GARDEN FULL OF SNOW *by T. M. Adams* 74

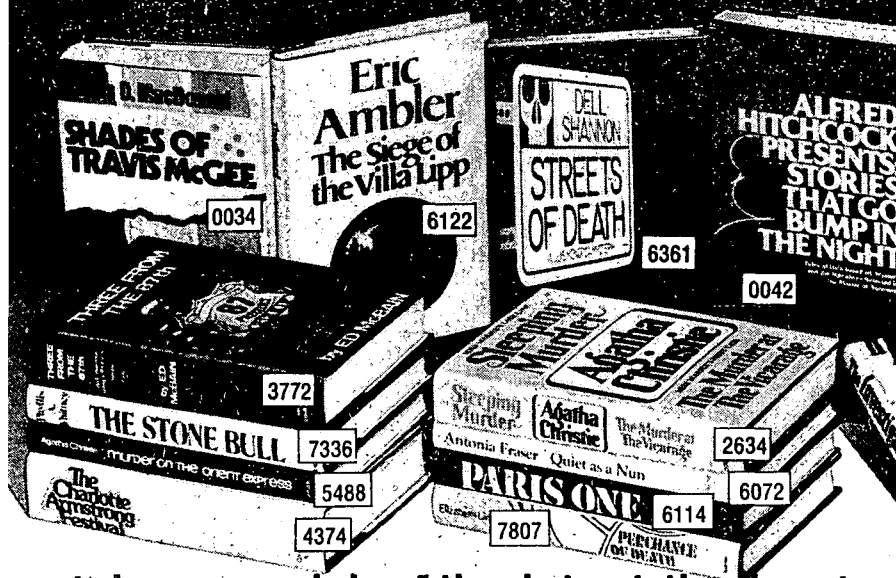
THE HUMMELMEYER OPERATION *by James Holding* 87

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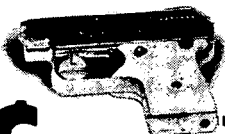
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Dear Reader:

Murphy's Law is an axiom of engineers and scientists that states: "If anything can go wrong, it will." Several of this issue's stories take their themes from Murphy's Law.

In "Murphy's Day" by Ernest Savage, detective Sam Train gets involved in a mixed-up kidnapping case that's full of surprises. A number of things go wrong for Barry N. Malzberg's hero in "The Appeal," many of them cards that fall wrong and horses that don't run right. "The Right Circumstances" don't always lead to the best consequences, as we find in Robert Edward Eckels' story. Some lives take a wrong turn in John Lutz's "The Music from Downstairs." Actors don't always learn their lines, but the actors in William Bankier's "Rock's Last Role" have an even worse problem.

"The Hummelmeier Operation" might fall victim to Murphy's Law in James Holding's story. And several characters could be said to share a Murphy's Day in T. M. Adams' "A Garden Full of Snow."

Good reading.

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It was all John Jay's fault, damn his eyes . . .

CORK AGAINST THE HULKS

by

S.S.
RAFFERTY



Of all the ridiculous escapades in which Cork has involved us over the years, not one could surpass our present predicament. Bad enough all those wasted years we spent gadding about these colonies in the clutch of his depraved desire to solve crimes. Bad enough that he let hang slack the accumulation of a vast mercantile fortune ready at hand for the taking. Bad enough that I, Wellman Oaks, a conscientious yeoman, have had to suffer his dalliances—balls in Charles Town, Boston Town, CORK AGAINST THE HULKS

Philadelphia, and New York; ladies of frippance hither and yon; coursing events; pok-ar; duels (husbands); endless buckets of oysters and tankards of Apple Knock. Now he has a new fascination. Cork has a war.

It is our financial ruin, this Revolution. Gone *The Hawkers*, a fine trading vessel now prowling about as an American capital ship. Gone the talc works and the choklit factory. By Jehovah, even the worthless copper mine up on the Hudson is in the hands of the British troops. Probably using it as a necessary, and rightly so.

It's all John Jay's fault, damn his eyes. When the separation hostilities started, he dangled a carrot before Captain Jeremy Cork's nose which he couldn't resist.

"Certainly you could raise a regiment of your own," he cajoled Cork that night back in '76. We were in Philadelphia and had just settled the Declaration Plot affair, probably the most important case in Cork's career as a detector. Oh, Cork was high in the stirrups, I can tell you. As full of himself as a six-foot-six man can get. "But you have demonstrated an uncanny sense of *spione*," Jay the Tempter went on. "Field intelligence will be the crux of this war, and you're the man for it, sir. You're a woodsman, a mariner, a shrewd logician and student of the human condition."

Cork's chest was poutering like a pigeon in love. Damn fool. In love with himself. Spying, indeed!

I think it was Jay's use of the title "sypmaster" that lured the lamb into the chute.

"Full control?" Cork asked.

Jay blanched. "Well, within reason. You report directly to me, *not* Washington."

There you have it. These rebels would well fit into the obscene subtleties of a French court on any given day. That was months ago, maybe a hundred years ago, or seemingly so. In that time, Washington has managed to lose every military encounter, despite Cork's ardent supply of information from his network of informants. In fact, Cork seems better organized for war than most of the senior Continental officers.

Everything we do is secret. Half the time I don't know where we are—or I'm told to forget it if I do. So my vagaries should be excused. I can tell you that, as of this writing, we were exactly thirty-five miles

from New York by *vade mecum* calculation. It was summer, as unbearably hot a summer as Long Island has ever had. The safe house where Cork had set up his clandestine headquarters was fronted by a forgotten trail and backed by salt-sanded beach.

I aroused on an August morning which was already proving to be a hotted blister on this earth's skin to find him huddled like a cold man at the rude table which served as our eating board, work table, and, twice, as a surgery slab for wounded agents.

He was looking at maps. Number 7, a redheaded Irishman in his thirties, sat across from him. All of them have numbers rather than names; don't ask me why—but Jay is impressed. (The workie's name is Reilly, and a bit of a lout.) Each agent, in addition to a number, has an identifying password in Injun jabber.

"Good morning," I said convivially. Cork grunted something and Number 7 sat suspiciously mute.

"You're sure?" Cork demanded of him.

"As sure as I em of me own mother, Captain. They brought *The Angel's* crew in last Tuesday."

"The full crew? No casualties?"

"Far as I can gather. *The Angel's* officers have been paroled, of course, but you said you was only interested in the crew."

"Correct."

I poured a cup of small beer and sauntered over to the table. The maps were crude, but the details were not beyond me, mostly because Number 7 had bothered, spy that he was, to mark it "Wallabout Bay."

I know the area well. Wallabout Bay is a belly of water that hangs off the East River in the upper reaches of Brooklyn. The old-time Dutchmen called it Wale Bogt, with good reason. At low tide, it is nothing more than a large expanse of mud flats, stench, and skeeters.

In '76, the area was an American stronghold; then, on an August morn such as this one of which I write, Howe's army poured ashore and devoured Long Island like carpenter ants spelling doom to all New York. The Wallabout was now a graveyard for British prison hulks.

Number 7 was tracing a line with a grimy finger. "'Ere's the channel at low tide, Captain."

"Yes, I know. The British call it The Wintering now."

"There are nine of 'em moored along the channel."

Cork squinted his eyes in thought as if to squeeze facts from his pro-

digious memory. "Nine? Then one is new." He ticked them off on his fingers. "*Whitly, Scorpion, Prince of Wales, John, Stromboli, Good Hope, Falmouth, and Hunter.*"

"And now the *Jersey*, Cap. She be the outermost ship in the southern curve of the channel."

"Aha, that's good news."

I was appalled. "Good news? Another hellhold is good news?"

"No, Oaks, my joy, is that a sixty-four-gun ship of the line no longer has fangs."

"The problem, Cap, is which hulk 'e's in."

"It's the *Jersey*, you can be sure of it. The other ships in the south channel—*Good Hope* and *Falmouth*—are hospital ships. 'Hospital ships,' he scoffed, "a typical English euphemism. He's in the *Jersey*, all right."

Whoever this mysterious person was, my heart went out to him. A British prison ship is a foul purgatory. Living on two-thirds rations of weevilly biscuits, putrefied salt pork, and suet creates horrors in the body. Locked below decks in leaking vessels breathing dank air makes death attractive. Many an American sailor or soldier has so died a slow death in the bowels of these ships which, ironically, are dead themselves.

Cork concluded his business with Number 7 with blunt dispatch, ordered me to give him five pounds, dismissed the man, and returned to brooding over the map. Back in the old days, when he took on the solution of "social puzzles" for the sport of it, I used to rankle him with chidement. But now I hold my tongue, for he is fiercely committed to the damnable war. And besides, there is nothing left to prod him about, since we have lost every pound and half joe he ever had. Oh, to be sure Washington begs the Congress for salary advances for officers, the privateers take a healthy cut of their prize money, and the field troops simply go home if they are not paid. But Cork insists on serving *sans d'argent*. That's not patriotism, it's peacockery. At least Washington gets expenses!

I was marking Reilly's—Number 7's—payment in my ledger book with disgust. He had drawn over sixty-five pounds in the past seven months, which is an indication of the lavish lives these field agents lead.

"He doesn't spend it on himself, Oaks," the Captain said, reading

the thoughts behind my facial expression. "He buys information, he snoops, he lives at the edge of his life."

"For five pounds, he well should! Do you know what five pounds would buy in New York City right now?"

He sighed impatiently—nay, in sufferance. "Oaks, you have an irritating love of coin but a lack of true enterprise. Here sits before you a man whose head is worth twenty thousand pounds. Why not slip out of here some night and collect the bounty from the Tories?"

He wasn't being cruel or challenging my loyalty. He just revels in the fact that the enemy would pay more to see him dead than Washington himself, and he loves to proclaim it.

I stuck to the issue. "Five pounds must have bought you a veritable trove of information."

His face softened to that grin that always perplexes me. It is the face of a wise child bearing some family secret best left untold.

"Or a pack of lies, my old son." He gave forth a huge sigh. "That's the problem with this *spione* business."

"You think Reilly is a turncoat?"

"No." He chuckled. "He hasn't the guile. It is the information that bothers me."

"All I know is that some Americans are prisoners aboard a prison hulk, which hardly seems like information."

"Let me complete the tapestry for you. Come, sit, for God's sake. Dump that beer and pour yourself some Knock. You're going to need it, lad."

And so Cork began that meticulous step-by-step assemblage of facts that ends in a pyramid of deductions coming to a concise top point. By Jupiter, that fine head is worth much more than twenty thousand pounds. It's priceless when put to a problem.

"You will recall Dispatch Number Four-oh-three?"

"Of course. It's in Volume Six of the Black Books. I'll get it."

"No need. I retain its substance. All right, then you know that our people in France have been urging support for our cause in a more open manner. Now, new facts in which you had no purview—don't look offended, Oaks, it was a verbal message from Jay."

I *was* offended, by God! Jay has a code number, Cork has a code number, a lout like Reilly has a code number, but I don't. Heaven forbid Wellman Oaks should know what's going on. All I seem to do is

hand out five pounds here and six pounds there and file dispatches. There isn't even a price on my head. What's the sense of living in danger when no one knows about it except yourself?

By "our people in France," he meant, of course, Franklin, Silas Deane, and Arthur Lee, the American commissioners who were desperately trying to convince Louis XVI to come openly into the war as our ally. Old Louis had balked at an open confrontation with England, but I wasn't taken in by all the gibberish in previous dispatches about the commissioners "buying supplies" from the Hotalés Company of Paris, which just happened to be run by Beaumarchais, the playwright. I didn't have to be an expert in *spione* to deduce that the money came from Louis's coffers, but Whitehall seemed too stupid to figure it out.

Cork went on. "Some weeks ago a clandestine plan was proffered by us to the French, and an agent was dispatched to present their response to the Congress. He was put aboard the cutter *Angel* off the Azores, and that was the last heard of both *The Angel* and the agent until Number 7 showed up here today. The ship was taken, so he tells me, by the royal frigate *Downs*, its crew transferred to a capital ship bound for the American patrol, and then sent aboard the Wallabout hulks."

"Won't our people in France dispatch another courier once they learn of *The Angel*'s capture?"

"There isn't time, damn it. For the loss of two words, a campaign is in jeopardy."

"Two words? Oh, forgive me—" I feigned humility "—that would be a breach of security."

"Stop cavilling. It's a code system I worked out for Franklin's use in sending messages to Congress. Four proposals were presented at the Quai d'Orsay, but only Franklin and the courier know which one was accepted. Two damned words!"

"Perhaps he will effect an escape."

"Very few have been successful. The inner Wallabout shoreline is heavily patrolled, and it's a long exhausting swim to the other side of the river for a man weakened by starvation rations."

Cork got to his feet, crossed the room to the window, and stared out at the water without seeing it. He was living in his head.

"What do you plan to do, Captain?"

He snapped back to the present, turned to me, and said casually,

"I'll just have to go and fetch him."

Now there you have Cork in all his simple directness. Waste not one iota of logic on the proposition that, if escape was nigh impossible, so was entry. Mere details have no residence in Cork's neighborhood.

He sat down at the table again and sipped Apple Knock most of the morning. I kept my silence and waited for that sign I know so well. It came around noon. His blue eyes began to twinkle and he stopped stroking his chin, then his long fingers snapped like a flintlock. He had it! Or thought he had.

He started out of the house and headed toward the small dock that ran out into the water. At its far end was a dilapidated storage shed once used by fishermen for nets and tackle and such. God knows what Cork uses it for—it's his private preserve and he is strict about its sole use. I threw caution to the winds and followed in his wake.

He seemed not to notice me until he reached the shed door and then, to my surprise, he said over his shoulder, "Well, man, don't dawdle. Time is our enemy."

I was so shocked by his allowing me into his inner sanctum that its interior was momentarily lost on me. Not for long, however, and when my senses were to rights, they were immediately numbed again.

"Wonder of wonders!" I exclaimed. "What devil's doing is this?"

There before me was what appeared to be the upright product of some fabulous bird. This fantastic wooden egg, about eight feet high and easily as much around, was banded by iron straps in the barrel-stave manner. From one side projected a rudder-like apparatus; on the other was a corkscrew propeller with another projecting from the top. It looked much the same as Bushnell's concoction except for a strange paddlewheel affair affixed above the rudder.

"The Turtle!" I cried. "It's a large version of Bushnell's submersible."

"Vastly improved. It's called The Tortoise."

So the sly dog was off on his own again, despite Washington's orders. The original Turtle was the creation of a Connecticut gadgeteer named David Bushnell, who had the ingenious idea of affixing mines to the bottom of enemy ships with a detachable auger device. On September sixth back in '76, Washington approved its use in a daring underwater attack on *HMS Eagle*. This 64-gunner was singled out because it was the flagship of Admiral Lord Howe. It was hoped that

both the *Eagle* and old Black Dick himself would go to the bottom. It failed for a number of reasons—mostly because of an inexperienced diver and an auger that couldn't penetrate the *Eagle's* hull. After two more failures, Washington abandoned the idea.

Oh, how Cork had ranted and raved when he heard of Washington's loss of interest! "What would a tobacco farmer know of seamanship?" he had bellowed. "Here he has a formidable weapon to put fear into the hearts of every British seaman afloat, and he brushes it aside!" (He truly respects Washington's field ability, but finds him weak in naval acumen.)

"Well, it did fail on three occasions," I reminded him. "No sense throwing good money after bad."

"You're as big an ass as he is, Oaks. The Turtle would have worked if only that diver had moved a few inches to the left or right under the *Eagle*. That auger struck the iron bar connecting the rudder fitting to the sternpost. They don't have rudders or sternposts on tobacco plantations, so they're a mystery to Washington."

As I stood there looking at this gigantic reproduction of Bushnell's idea, a new sense of poverty came over me. If Congress wouldn't provide funds for submersibles, I could guess who did.

He walked over to it and rapped on its oak hull. "Sound as a dollar," he said, knowing the full worth of the American shinbuck. "And ready just in time."

Suddenly I saw his plan, and I felt a goose walk over my grave. War does strange things to men's minds. It turns some into jellied cowards and inflates others to heroic proportions. Then there are those souls who lose all perspective in their blood lust and turn fiendish. I feared Cork had now joined that depraved regiment.

"You can't!" I shrieked. "I'll axe that hull myself before I'll let you commit this atrocity."

"What the devil are you babbling about?"

"Captain—" I pleaded with him—"you will be blowing up hundreds of innocent prisoners—our own men! You would do this to silence a spy?"

That smirk-a-mouth of his is the most annoying habit he has. It says multitudes, and this time it told me that I should be dragged off and locked in an attic like a looney relative.

"Oaks, my friend," he said in mock patience, "you have the singular

ability always to miss the point. In the bawdy house of life, you waste your precious time listening to the piano player. I want that agent alive and talking, you twit. I need two words."

With this, he took a ladder from the corner and propped it against the submersible. Bawdy house, indeed! *He* is our resident authority on such places. And I am not partial to piano music at all. Fiddles are my meat.

At the top of the ladder, Cork opened the hatch of his contraption and I ventured to open the one on my face.

"So you're going to sail up to the hulk and have our man jump aboard, are you? I assume they have guards posted."

He was climbing down inside the egg and his voice echoed out to me. It was like talking to the Oracle at Delphi, which I believe Cork thinks he is at times.

"There are guards." His voice reverberated from the hatch. "Probably a Lieutenant, two mates, and a dozen seamen."

"Well, that's not too many!" I shouted up to him.

"And thirty soldiers, probably Hessians, since the *Jersey* is new to the Wallabout."

"Well, when do we leave?"

Now the Oracle was erupting. "We? What in hell do you mean, *we*?" His words flowed like molten lava, but I was undaunted. We argued most of the afternoon and into the evening, and finally I hit upon a subtle but effective premise.

"It's in your best interest to take me, and, by the way, that submersible *will* carry three men. I checked." We were at a late supper of cold potatoes and cod. "Captain, if you leave me here in enemy territory I am bound to be captured sooner or later—if something happens to you, all the sooner, I fear. A fellow of my constitution would not stand up long to the brutalities of interrogation. Heaven forbid I would be tortured beyond endurance. They would extract my finger- and toe-nails one by one, then hot oil would be applied in insidious places, drop by drop. Failing that—and I shudder to think of it—the Squaw's Revenge. No, Captain, I would break, and I'm the only person outside of yourself who knows the full fabric of your spy network—names, locations, plans, everything—hide, hair, and tallow."

The mention of the Hairbuyer was my master stroke. He is Cork's British counterpart, his nemesis. Cork has laid a personal £10,000

bounty on his head. Even if we do win the war, it will be cold potatoes and cod forevermore. The point that rasps Cork's soul is that he doesn't know this cruel butcher's identity, while the British are fully aware of Cork's—at least his name, if not his location.

The Hairbuyer got his name from the savage Indians who serve the British. I commented earlier on what evil things war can do to men, and he is its most fiendish example. He buys the scalps of the wives of American officers and manages to have them delivered to their unfortunate husbands in the field. Cork calls it warfare of the soul. I call it gruesome.

"We leave tomorrow night," Cork said, to my astonishment. I had expected at least six hours more haranguing.

"We do?"

"Yes."

"Well," I said in triumph, "I am most happy to learn that I am of some importance to this organization."

"Oh, you are. You're pedalling the paddlewheel. Now shut up and bring me the East River charts."

Two days later, I lay exhausted in a dank salt marsh in the center of Wallabout Bay. My legs ached with pain from treading The Tortoise up the river all the way from Governor's Island to the Bay. After much preparation, we had left the safe-house dock after sunset the previous night in a "Tory" fishing smack, slipped across Great South Bay and into the open Atlantic with the submerged Tortoise in tow.

When the tide turned, we tacked landward again, entered the Narrows, and crossed over Upper New York Bay past the unsuspecting British patrol barges. Off Governor's Island, Cork and I cast off in The Tortoise, he at the glowing foxfire-coated instruments, I at the treadle.

Although my legs were soon numb as we made our way upriver, I actually had the easier task. Cork had plenty to do keeping us on course. When I felt I could not move a leg one more time he said, "All stop, Oaks," and The Tortoise started to rotate.

"Now pedal like hell," he commanded, "we are going into Wallabout."

We sat in the submersible until the tide drained the water-covered mud flats and then we emerged into the sunlight to find ourselves safely hidden amid the tall reeds.

The skeeters were infernally happy to have us among them, while

overhead the scavenger gulls squeaked like unoiled hinges. In the oppressive heat of the noonday sun, the whole place reeked of fish. Across the tidal pond lay the hulks, grim and foreboding. Through blurry eyes, I watched these once-proud mistresses of war barely moving in the low tide of their degradation. I could not help but think they were like some once gay king's courtesans, now toothless and haggard, sent to the putrid castle dungeons belowstairs.

Cork lay against a small hummock, studying his prey through a long glass.

"Well, that's a bit of luck," he whispered to himself.

"Luck?"

He handed me the glass and I trained it at the *Jersey* on the outside anchorage. The magnification, to my eyes, made her all the more gruesome. Her rotting hull had been stripped of her proud fittings—the useless whore's jewels returned to the sovereign's treasury—leaving only the flagstaff and bowsprit. Even the rudder was gone, rendering her an aimless cripple to be abused by jailers. A spar amidships supported a derrick which probably hauled aboard the awful swill the prisoners ate and, I suppose, the poor devils relished. There were rude cabins, more like shacks, fore and aft and, for a touch of homeyness, a clothesline was strung with washing. About the decks milled ragged men under the wary eyes and ready muskets of soldiers.

I took the long glass from my eye and wiped away the sweat it had created. "If it's luck, I don't see it. That thing is impregnable."

"Look astern," Cork softly commanded.

Again the magnification. There were two British naval officers apparently talking to a Hessian officer of Grenadiers. The sun glittered off the brass plate of the Dutchman's turnback cap:

"You conjectured Hessian guards back on Long Island. But the guards on duty are British!"

"A mixed complement, and that's good luck. Obviously the Hessians have the night watch, and they probably resent it. Moody sentries are rarely alert, and they avoid the diseased corpses stored on deck for the next day's burial ashore. Don't look aghast, Oaks. Number Seven has observed the hulk's routine. The prisoners are shut below at dusk and allowed on deck at dawn. We will swim over tonight and slip aboard on the aft mooring chains."

"Then what?"

"We'll know when we get there. Better start rending our clothes so we can mingle with the prisoners unnoticed."

The last was not difficult to accomplish, since our ordinary seaman's slops were as ragged and filthy as if they had originally been issued aboard Noah's ark. But the first part—"We'll know when we get there"—filled my belly with dread.

"Do you know whom we are looking for once we get aboard, Captain?"

"One of two agents. One named Willis Aymes is the primary, or Edward Thatch, his backup."

"Each carries one of the two words, no doubt."

"No," Cork said, training the long glass back on the *Jersey*, "both carry the message. One is for safety, lest something happen to the other."

I now knew my real purpose for being there and I nearly cried with pride. I was Cork's backup on this mission of missions!

"Are they known to you by sight, Captain?"

"No, but either one should not be hard to find. Number Seven knows for sure that Willis Aymes is aboard; he couldn't verify Thatch on the Provost's list, but the records the British keep can't match yours, old son."

Now how Number 7 ever got to look at the Provost's list is a mystery to me, but I could see where some of that five pounds had gone. We slept.

It was six bells in the mid-watch and, from our eerie hiding place among the unshrouded corpses on the *Jersey's* middecks, I could hear the hulk fleet sound the hour, up and down the channel in a ghostly echo. Three o'clock, I thought, and only an hour or so before dawn, thank Jehovah! Cork had been correct about the Hessian's laxity, and we came up the after chains easily and found, indeed, that death was a daily occurrence on this hulk. There were at least ten bodies laid in a clump, and we lay among them and waited.

Somewhere forward, the young guards were fruitlessly trying to teach a parrot what were obviously German obscenities and, after an hour of failure, they fell back on guttural English swear words for their amusement—to no avail, because I could hardly understand them, never mind the parrot. Nevertheless, when they gave up in disgust,

saying, "*Das Schwartzbart ist ein dummkopf*," I wished they had stayed with it; it distracted me from my horrible surroundings.

I felt a nudge in my side and Cork's huge hand literally dragged me to the starboard side of the ship. In the dark I heard him rustle a tarpaulin, and then I was rolled under it with him behind me. It was stifling and I started to whisper my discomfort, but stopped. Of course! He had surveyed this hiding place during the day through the long glass, but to have used it for several hours on coming aboard would have suffocated us in the oppressive heat. But now the dawn was almost upon us and we had to take cover.

From the swelter of our lair, my ears greeted a multitude of sounds—the sounds of a war-day. First, the slap-slap of oar looms of the burial boat and the muffled voices of the graves detail taking off the dead. Eight bells chimed through my brain and then, from the shore, the heroic drum ruffle of reveille with sentries relieved of challenge and boyish fright. Our canvas covering was now hot as a stovetop. New sounds—the drums ashore beating troop assembly with its quarter-time tempo which the soldiers call the Ladies' Parade. The *Jersey* was abustle with movement as if this old whore was about to tremble herself into some futile modicum of respectability. The Hessian guards' guttural was replaced by Kentish English and at last the rattle of the lug chains over the prisoner hatches running free.

"Now," Cork whispered, and we rolled out into the glare of sunshine. I'm not a Papist, but if there is such a thing as purgatory it was there before my eyes. Like ravenous, red-eyed dogs, the wretched, ragged men burst upon feed pots of oatmeal thick as paste and devoid of human acceptance. Yet they shoved and fought to dip their bowls into it.

"Look alive now," Cork said, nudging me into reality. "My name is Connor. You're Treford, taken off the prize *Gloria*. Follow my trail."

What else have I been doing these many years? I did again, to the larboard rail where the men were feeding.

"'Morn to ya," Cork said to a man standing alone, finger-scooping porridge into a mouth lacking front teeth. He was possibly the ugliest creature I have ever seen—shortish, with cruel grey eyes set into a completely bald head, with deep scars embedded in his cheeks and massive forearms. He looked like an abused tavern fireplace—solid, sooty, and scarred by over-use.

"Who the hell's you?" he asked between fingerfuls.

"Connor, off'n the *Gloria*, taken two months back. Came over from Falmouth yonder after the belly gripes like my mate 'ere, Treford."

Cork forgets nothing. The *Gloria* privateer was taken off the Carolinas. I kneaded my brain. There *were* men named Connor and Treford on its manifest.

"Must be mighty hearty to survive hospital," the fireplace said warily. "Mine's Bunch Booth, Master at Arms in *Angel* until two weeks aback."

He did not extend a hand, and thank God, for I would have had to accept that filthy, porridge-dripping paw, which looked more like a vise than a hand. He was well suited to a Master-at-Arms berth. How well the abused know how to abuse.

"*Angel*, eh?" Cork said in slovenly dialect. "Say, I had a few mates in 'er. Name o' Aymes and Thatch. Sure like see 'em oncet more on earth."

"Well, if it's Aymes y' seek, best take a spade," said the brute, pointing to shore. "Died two nights ago. Now, Thatch—" he cocked his cloudy eye "—there's no Thatch in *Angel* and that's a certainty. Say, you fellows look mighty too healthy fer comin' off a hospital hulk."

"You don't look too peaky yourself."

A toothless grin came forward. "Twenty-five year afloat. Hell, I lived on maggot pork and biscuits that'd crack a rat's teeth since I could walk. Aymes was a good hand in *Angel*, good foretopman."

"Too bad he didn't get shipped over to Falmouth," Cork said.

"Would have been a waste—'e was stabbed—run through like a sand shark in the night."

Only someone who has known Cork as long as I have could sense the jolt this news sent through him. With Aymes dead and Thatch not even aboard, all our efforts were for naught.

"Stabbed?" Cork's tone was suspicious. "The British are usually very thorough in a prisoner shake-out. Was it a fight over food?"

Bunch Booth shrugged his massive shoulders, a movement that seemed unnatural, almost coquettish, for his rough and ready demeanor. "Who knows in the night what goes on, matey; who knows?"

He moved away on the crowded deck.

"That's a curious customer," I said above the babbling din.

"More curious than you know, Oaks."

"We'd best make plans to get out of here since we came on a goose chase."

"No, we'll tarry a bit," Cork murmured solemnly.

"Tarry! Captain, this is insanity! Aymes is dead, and Thatch doesn't seem to exist. What could we possibly gain by staying in this awful place?"

"Several things. First, is Aymes truly dead? Second, is Thatch here under another name? Third, we have there a 'curious customer,' as you call him." He nodded at a knot of men yarning with Bunch Booth at the middeck. "Most convivial for a former Master at Arms. They're usually the most hated men aboard any ship."

"Well, incarceration tends to boil away old bitterness."

"He's a liar or something else, you can mark it."

"A liar? About Aymes's death? You have no proof."

"About Aymes being a fine foretopman. Think, lad. *The Angel* was a cutter, single-mainmasted, built for speed with a great press of canvas, but *no* foremast in the mariner's sense. A veteran sailor such as Booth is supposed to be wouldn't make such a mistake, if he is what he claims. We'll save time if we split up and talk with as many men as we can. Don't waste time with anyone who was not in *The Angel*. I'll take the forward deck section, and you go aft."

I started to move, but Cork's hand stayed me for a second. "Be careful, Oaks. And stay clear of Bunch Booth."

I began my trek through the mass of ragged men, some sitting mumbling in groups of twos and threes, some standing alone, staring vacantly. Through their grim tatters, I could make out that the majority were soldiers, the length of their beards and the degree of their emaciation grimly indicating the length of their imprisonment.

As I neared the riser of the quarterdeck, I looked up at a strange and pathetic sight. A child, a boy no more than eight or nine, was leaning against the fife rail, feeding bits of bread to a parrot. It was strange that a child should be in this place; pathetic because a few of the morsels fell to the lower deck where a prisoner greedily retrieved the crumbs like a barnyard hen. As I neared the prisoner, he eyed me warily, as if to defend his feeding ground. On my approach, the boy quickly disappeared.

"Yer too late fer breakfast, mate," the man taunted me. In good health, he was probably thin by nature, but now he looked like a

railbird—the appearance heightened all the more by his small stature and beak-like nose.

“Pretty damn cruel, if you ask me,” I said, “letting that child tantalize you with crumbs from a parrot’s mouth.”

The little man cackled. “He’s not tantalizin’, he’s helping his shipmate. You must be new aboard.”

I told him the hospital-ship story. “That little tyke was a crewman?”

“Well, you might say he was. I was the cook aboard *Angel*, and little Jibs was my galley boy.”

My ears pricked up at the mention of *Angel* and I let him go on.

“The boy was living with his American grandma in France and the old lady died. He has kin in Massachusetts, so the Frenchies was sendin’ him home. We got jumped and he got took like the rest of us. The lobsterbacks are arrangin’ to send him home, but it’ll take a month, the way they work. Well, at least two from *The Angel* is gettin’ decent food.”

“I wouldn’t call the crumbs he dropped decent food.”

“Not me. Him and Blackbeard. The parrot. The Lieutenant let him keep the bird for amusement. I guess the British navy ain’t all rotten. I can’t say the same for the Kraut-eaters though. It makes ’em madder than hell because they can’t teach him cusswords. That parrot’s dumb as Job’s turkey.”

I asked after my “old friends,” Aymes and Thatch, and got the same answer we had gotten from Bunch Booth. Aymes was dead and there never was a man named Thatch aboard *The Angel*.

“Say, if you was a friend of Aymes,” the seacook, who gave his name as Potts, suggested, “you probably got a right to what little gear he had. It ain’t much, but if we ever get off this hellhold you could turn it over to his folks.”

My heart started to beat faster, calling my brain to quarters. If Aymes had left some belongings behind, he might have left the message among them. I looked about in vain for Cork and then, not wishing to lose the opportunity, took action.

“Can I see them?”

“Sure, mate, come on belowdecks.”

I think it was the Italian fellow whom Cork occasionally reads—Diego or Dante something—who described a descent into hell, and

now I was living it. The heat mixed with the dampness of rotting timbers created a steamy vapor in the air that carried the awful stench deeper into my lungs.

"Over this way, mate." Potts guided me in the half light that filtered in from the old gun ports, now latticed with iron bars.

Suddenly, I felt a jolting pain in my throat. My locomotion stopped and, for a moment, so too my awareness, except that I was choking. Somehow my brain cleared enough to ken that a massive arm had encircled my neck and held me in an excruciating death-lock.

"Squirms like an eel, don't 'e, Bunch?" I heard Potts cackling.

"More like a snake. Hold still, you murderous, spying scum." The grip grew tighter and I was about to pass out.

"Belay that, Bunch," I heard the salvation of Cork's voice. "You're covered."

Sweet relief of release brought air—still foul, but welcome—back into me. As I rubbed my neck, I could see the Captain standing like a specter in the shadow of a stanchion, a boarding pistol in his hand. He must have secreted it on himself before we left the safe house. Ever practical, I wondered if the flintlock was still damp from our swim, and obviously so did Cork, for he pressed the forward trigger and the spring bayonet flicked into place. Perhaps he did it for effect; he loves drama.

"So it's the other one," Bunch growled, "and right as a true bearing I was about you two. Spies sent among us like bilge rats at the grain sacks. That damned idiot Cunningham didn't even have enough sense to send a spy who knew somethin' about sailin' a ship. Foretopman, hah! He was no sailor a'tall, poor lad. But I ran up yer true pennant when you swallowed that one."

The Cunningham of whom he spoke was Captain William Cunningham, Provost Marshal of New York. Our dossiers on this black-Irish criminal-turned-soldier bulged with his cruelties.

Cork, still training the boarding pistol on them, asked the Master at Arms, "Why didn't you accept parole along with the other officers and senior mates?"

Bunch Booth scoffed defiantly. "Same as I told yer butcherin' Provost, ya lickspittle, parole is to give yer word, and I can't." He turned his massive bull head with its scarred face to the quivering Potts. "Sorry, Cookie, we couldn't have strangled the skinny one for Lady

Liberty." He turned back to Cork. "Well, have at it and make it clean." He laughed again at an afterthought. "At least you'll get no scalp from me."

A strange expression came into Cork's face, one I'd never seen before. He looked like a stunned schoolboy who had been told that all his sums were wrong. The pistol came down to his side, the bayonet resprung and secured in his belt. He came forward to a surprised but still wary Bunch Booth. "You're a true son of liberty, sir, and I give you my hand on it."

That handclasp was like two gigantic palmetto leaves entwined, and one of the most manly expressions of mutual respect I have ever experienced. I didn't have to be told, nor did Cork, why Bunch had refused parole. It went beyond loyalty to his crew and scaled the heights of sacrifice. This rough-and-tumble seaman would, by sheer determination, keep his men's spirits alive, if not their bodies. He was a walking symbol of diffident fortitude—what the Americans call guts.

As we later learned, he had been pressed into the Royal Navy at twelve, never to see Spithead again until he was eighteen, only to ship out again—until he jumped ship in the Indies and plied his trade in various American bottoms. If the brutalities of navy life—the floggings, the weary watches before the mast, the harsh discipline of "gentlemen" officers, and the months of tainted food—couldn't break him, how could this hulk? Perhaps there is some Divine scheme that prepares us for one brilliant hour.

Cork huddled us into the darker shadows and spoke rapidly and incisively. "Our business here is of vital importance to the cause, Booth. Is Aymes really dead? Where is Thatch and what's this about scalping?"

"Aymes is dead and he *was* stabbed and scalped, although the other lads don't know about that part. No sense puttin' more fear in 'em. Me and Potts wrapped him in a shroud and put him out with the dead like he passed normal-like. I told you he was stabbed because I wanted to see how you took the wind of it. And you didn't show a ripple. That's why I saw you as a spy. There's no Thatch here and that's on the book, brother."

"Whom do you suspect of Aymes's murder?"

"None of my crew, but we got a lot of other crews *and* soldiers aboard."

"Who else died the same night as Aymes? Think carefully, Booth."

"'Tain't hard," Potts piped. "I was on burial detail, both Mr. Booth and me. There was a young soldier name of Coombs and that slant-eyed duck—what's 'is name?" He looked at Booth.

"Never knew it to tell. Looked like a half-breed harpooner I once met."

Cork shook his head in disgust. "A Micmac Abenaki."

"A what?"

"A Nova Scotia member of the Abenaki nation, Oaks. They resemble Orientals in feature because they have mixed blood with the snow tribes of the Arctic regions."

"But he was deader'n a mackerel," Potts exclaimed, "and he didn't kill himself neither."

"An Indian can play possum for hours, and with the help of an herbal concoction he can truly appear dead, even to a gravesman."

"You mean Cunningham sent a murderin' savage in here?"

"No, Booth. Cunningham is a blackguard, but he knows nothing of Indians and how to control them." Cork stopped for a moment and a sly smile gave way to his muttering. "So at last he's tipped his hand!"

"What say?"

"Never mind. It's another matter, Booth. It seems our trip has been foiled, Oaks, and now we must plan an escape."

"I'm still tryin' to figger out how you got aboard." Bunch Booth scratched his head and gave us a toothless smile.

"That, too, will have to wait. First, are there any weakened bars on the gunports?"

Another smile from Booth, this time like that of a fox. "Aye, but these lads are too weak to swim for it."

"I'll try to have supplies smuggled to you. And believe me, Congress will hear of these conditions. Now, tonight, we are going to have a bit of an insurrection of our own."

That night, we could hear the din raised by the prisoners as we quietly swam across the flooding Tidal Pond. After some difficulty, we found the flotation markers Cork had left and made our way to the half-submerged Tortoise.

Once aboard, Cork located the sulphur stick-box and lit a candle to check the instruments.

"Don't look so woebegone, Oaks. At least we know The Hairbuyer's

operating in Canada at the moment."

"I was thinking of the little boy. I trust he is sent home safely."

"What little boy?"

"The little blond fellow on the quarterdeck. Didn't you see him this morning? He was feeding his parrot, Blackbeard, and Potts at the same time."

"Confound and goddamn you, man," he fumed, "when will you learn to report every detail?" He started to scamper out of the submersible.

"The tide will be turning in an hour," he said sternly. "If I haven't returned by then, you are to drift out with it as best you can. If you get back, send this message to Congress: They are not to be hoodwinked into thinking the message from Paris has been intercepted when they receive Aymes's scalp. Even if his wife or kin identifies it, they are to pay it no mind."

"But, Captain," I pleaded, "the child will certainly be transferred home. Why risk it?"

He reached down before he went out the hatch and touched my shoulder. "I'm sorry I abused you, old son. Have a care now."

I waited in the dreadful darkness, praying for his safety. How like him to go back for Jibs or any child. Oh, I know over the years people have laughed behind my back over my steadfast loyalty to Cork. But they will never know how it feels to be sold into bondage, to come to a strange land and then, at a Philadelphia dockside, to be bought like a sack of apples by a tall sunburned American in buckskins and then have that man turn to you and say, "Well, man, what are you waiting about for? Go now, lad, you're free." And when I asked why, to be told, "Because I can't buy them all, and you looked the most in need of freedom."

Over the years, I have harangued about his extravagances, his excesses; and yet his first extravagance was me.

The depth bubble was rising all too fast for my liking when I heard the thud and clatter at the hatch. I thanked God and opened it. His wet body dropped down. He secured the hatch tightly and said breathlessly, "Strike the candle, Oaks."

I did, and saw him standing shirtless and exhausted.

"You couldn't get the child, then. Too bad."

"Don't worry. The child will get home. I got what I wanted."

From behind him, he had his shirt tied like a sack, and from it he took the damned parrot. "Meet our agent, Mr. Thatch," he said triumphantly.

"Oh, Captain," I said with true pity, "you're mistaken. Potts told me, he's as dumb as Job's turkey. Even the Hessian guards gave up in disgust last night."

"Then there were a flock of Job's turkeys aboard that ship, and I among them until you told me his name was Blackbeard. Don't you see? Franklin's a clever old coot. What was Blackbeard the pirate's real name?"

"Tench, I believe."

"Or Thatch. No one was ever quite sure. Leave it to an old printer like Franklin to remember that oddity, but then he was a printer's apprentice when Blackbeard was holding sway, and facts like that stick in a boy's mind."

"But the bird can't talk—or imitate, to be more correct."

"Parrots *are* stupid, Oaks, but that's because people don't know how to get their attention. Down in Spanish America, they have a trick of teaching them most anything—but you have to do it in the dark, so they can concentrate on the lesson."

"Well," I said, trying not to sound ignorant, "did you have a nice conversation on the way back? It's certainly dark enough in the water."

"A very nice conversation, to be sure—eh, Polly? Listen."

All I heard were cackles and squawks, and I told Cork so.

"You don't hear it because you don't know what you're supposed to hear."

The bird rattled on, over and over, with the same gibberish.

"Am I supposed to hear 'cawkee-gee, cawkee-gee'?"

"Close enough."

"Those are the two words? Cawkee-gee? Wait, is this Injun jabber?"

Cork grinned.

"And that bird has been saying the secret code words all over the ship, with no one the wiser?"

"I would have been if I had gone aft and you-forward."

"But you didn't know Franklin was going to use a parrot."

"No, but I would have gotten the Blackbeard-Thatch connection, and I did once I was properly *informed*. The use of Quininiapiac dialect words was prearranged before Franklin left for France. The *spione*

situation must be quite fierce there, and Franklin suspected that Aymes might be intercepted. And he was right, since *The Angel* was jumped and Cunningham himself interrogated the crew."

"But how did Aymes get singled out for death and scalping?"

"We did not see his remains, but I suspect Franklin might have erred in choosing him as a courier. Bunch said he was no sailor: The Provost saw through his role and, knowing he could not extract information by torture, passed his finding to The Hairbuyer."

"But how could Franklin be sure you'd get the parrot?"

"If Aymes fell, then Jibs was to get the bird into safe hands, the lad tells me, and, considering his age, his release was assured. The boy only knew he had a stupid bird. Now, let's to work. I have what I came for."

The tide was at the turning, which made the treadle work easier.

"I suppose we'll have to give the parrot a number, since he's a top spy," I chided.

He ignored me with silence, but I could tell he was chuckling. Damn him.

"And put him on the pay books," I said airily.

More silence.

"And give him an Injun jabber password."

The bird cawed. "Cawkee-gee."

Cork navigated in silence.

And I, as usual, persist.

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It is different coin for a gambler . . .

THE APPEAL



by
**BARRY N.
MALZBERG**

The one-time maiden special who ran in the maiden claimer proved to be there for a reason—the horse broke down on the backstretch and came home on three and a half legs—so I was down another four hundred. One should not parlay losings. Nevertheless, convinced that my bad streak was now at its logical end, I took a limousine to the famous and relatively new casino hotel in Atlantic City and applied the principles of Martingale to roulette, driven by the fact that anyone so

famous as to have a system named after him had to have something going for him. Seven turns of the red taught me the probable reason why the professor had been dead for so long.

Things were getting serious so I tried card-counting at blackjack but a blonde disturbed my recall and the cigarette smoke was hurting my eyes. Also, at a certain point the dealer brought in a new deck.

"You can't do that," I said to him desperately.

"Is that a law?" he said with an expression so quizzical and winsome that I found myself without a comeback.

Monmouth Racetrack is not inconveniently far north from the famous new hotel casino and so, knowing that matters were at a most difficult pass, I took public transportation rather than a limousine to the shore, arriving there at eleven in the A.M., which gave me two hours and fifteen minutes to work on my specialty, which happens to be the daily double. Someone in the upper grandstand was rumored to have hit the \$3,400 double which occurred on this date but I did not make the acquaintance of this person either before or after the race. With seventy-three dollars left, I decided to make one of those perilous leaps into the unknown which have in the past made me known to my friends as a spirited and adventurous man. But hurdles races in the late fall are a leap into the unknown for the wretched horses who run them, let alone the horseplayers. Accordingly, I presented myself in the offices of Louis the Fourteenth on the following day.

Louis is called the Fourteenth, or the Quatorze as he sometimes prefers because of the touch of class, since he is the fourteenth direct descendant of his family engaged in the same trade. At least this is what the Quatorze claims, and I do not dispute with him, nor does the Quatorze tend to surround himself with those with whom one would wish to dispute. It took me forty-three minutes to get into his offices and it was not worth it, but of course I had no choice. "I will need a little more time, Louis," I said to him. "It is a simple matter of assembling collections already due me but I am unable to settle the obligation at the present time."

The Quatorze looked at me unhappily. There is something about the unhappiness of a short dapper man which can be peculiarly unsettling. "The tab is seven thousand dollars," he said. "Not to forget the change which is three hundred and forty-three dollars and I do not mean cents."

"I know that, Louis."

"I would prefer if you would address me more formally. You promised settlement for today."

"I know that."

"There have been extensions," the Quatorze said, biting his lip and looking at the paper in his hand. "*Several* extensions. The extensions, as a matter of fact, appear to have begun three months and fourteen days ago."

The Quatorze is a precise man with good help, an unbeatable combination. "I know about that," I repeated. "It is merely unfortunate difficulties which I am having—family illness, an aged father, difficult debts, business pressures . . ."

The Quatorze put the paper aside and leaned on his elbows alertly. "You have no family," he stated, "other than that which has disowned you, including your aged father who lives very well on the coast of Florida. You have no business. Pressures and debts you do have."

I nodded at him as gracefully as possible under the circumstances. "Your information is very good."

"In my line of work my information had better be good. I am dependent upon my sources. My sources, however, have let me down in allowing a tab of this size to accumulate. I will have to get some new sources." Louis picked a small slice of lint from the area covering his kneecap. "I will have to hit my sources over the head and drop them south of here if they do not do somewhat better than they have in your case."

"I just need a little time," I said.

"The gambler and the alcoholic do not need time," Louis said. "I have thought about this deeply. Gambling and alcoholism are an attempt to suspend time with which it is otherwise difficult to deal. I am not a simple man, you know. I am a complex person. I come to this kind of work through inheritance and I think deeply. I want the money."

"I don't have—"

Louis put his palms flat on the desk, and raised himself. In this position, he had no height problem whatsoever. "I want the money," he said. "I will give you until tomorrow morning because I am a reasonable man and the banks are already closed. If the money is not here by the opening of business tomorrow I will have to consult with my

sources, who in turn must consult with you. I am unable to speak for them. They are not very dependable but then again they have very literal minds."

"Louis—" I said, venturing an appeal.

"Appeals are useless," he said. "Appeals will not work. Pleas for mercy, expressions of reason, mild and sensible requests for delay—all purposeless. It is a difficult world. Time passes, time pressures; it is different coin for an institution, which I am, than for a gambler, which you are. You will please leave now."

"Now, Louis—"

"You will leave," Louis said, and at my elbow appeared two assistants whose presence in the room up until that point had been masked perhaps by my own urgency. They conveyed me with stunning speed and force to an antechamber where I was permitted to wipe my forehead and adjust the cuffs of my best suit. "You hear him," one of the assistants said. "You hear him good."

"I don't have to take abuse," I said. "The fact that you work for the Quatorze does not entitle you to assume his role."

"You must be some kind of a college graduate," the other assistant said.

"On the contrary," I said, "I am self-educated."

"You are a clown."

"I am entitled to my dignity," I added various other things while in the process of making my exit. It is useless to argue with the assistants of the Quatorze, who do not share his relative dispassion or his height problem. In the street, however, the difficulties of my situation came, so to speak, crashing down upon me and fragments of my departing dialogue bubbled to my lips. "Dignity is all we have," I said, and, "The only way out is to make the extended reach," and, "It's all metaphysical," and so on and so forth. All of this speculation, the outcome of strong self-education, carried me in a half-comatose condition through several hours and several miles of public and private transportation until I reached that place which I must have always known I would reach but of course could not have attempted had I given it conscious thought. A man after all has his pride; even maiden claimers are registered thoroughbreds.

"I need seven thousand three hundred dollars, Mother," I said after we had gone through the amenities and settled in the rather large liv-

ing room. "I have never seen fit to call on you like this before and have kept you well segregated from all of my activities—the Quatorze, for instance, not being aware that I *do* have a family or, more strictly speaking, that I have you."

"What do you need seven thousand three hundred dollars for?" she said quietly. I twitched on my chair. My mother has always intimidated me. The only person who has ever really been able to stand up to her is my stepfather but my stepfather is unfortunately often out of town for reasons of his own. "Sit up straight," she said. "Address the question. Don't look at your shoes."

"I have had business reverses," I said.

She laughed, a laugh that sounded oddly like that of the Quatorze. "You have no business," she said.

"You have no idea *what* I have. Our lives have not exactly been closely touching these many years."

"And a good thing too," she said, adjusting her glittering spectacles, little flickers of ruined light bouncing from the fluorescence off the lenses. "A very good thing. Seven thousand three hundred dollars. That is an extraordinary amount of money."

"It is half the price of a new Cadillac. It is a third of a year's income for a steelworker. It is *not*—"

"You are not a steelworker and you don't own a Cadillac. Business reverses!" she said. "I know what it is."

"I do not come to be lectured—"

"It's the wheel of fortune, that's what it is!" she said, and laughed until she began to cough. She quieted herself into little sobs and chuckles with a cigarette. She is not a woman of endearing habits. "You've been into all that stuff again, the horses and the dice. You probably never stopped."

"Will you help me or won't you?" I said. I paused. "This is not easy for me, you know. In fact it is rather humiliating."

"Life is a humiliation," my mother said. "The sooner you accept the fact that you *like* it that way, the better off you'll be." She took off her glasses, took a sip of coffee. "Seven thousand three hundred dollars," she said. "How very strange. How very odd that you would think that I would give it to you. Where did you get the idea?"

"Lend it to me. At interest."

"Lend it," she said. "Ah yes, lend it. Of course." She shook her

head. "Your father was right about you. It was the only thing that man said that I agreed with but he was right. You'll never change, will you?"

"You have the money," I said. "I mean I know you have it around. In here, in the house. You always kept twenty or thirty thousand dollars around. You said you believed in the cash on hand, that you never knew the value of money or how to respect it unless you could have it in your hands."

"That was a long time ago. Things have changed. Besides, I wouldn't keep that kind of money around with your stepfather in the house. Totally untrustworthy. Half a crook if I must tell you the truth. I made a mistake with that man but what can I do?"

"You can lend me seven thousand three hundred dollars."

She clasped her hands. "Absolutely not," she said. "In the first place I don't have it in the house, and in the second place I don't have it, and in the third place I wouldn't give it to you on principle. You're twenty-nine years old. It's time you accepted responsibility for your condition."

"You're like the Quatorze," I said.

"I don't know who you're talking about."

"Everybody knows what I should do. Everybody has the answers. But none of you know the pain."

"I know the pain," she said, looking at me keenly. "For one thing I have a son like you and you had a father like that man down in Florida now. I know pain, believe me."

"I'm going to be in bad trouble if I don't get the money," I said. "I have nowhere else to turn. Those people are serious. They talk in funny sentences and they kid around a lot but the Quatorze is not the fourteenth of his generation because he wears plaid jackets or talks out of the side of his mouth. The Quatorze is dead serious. And so am I."

"And so am I. No."

"I can't speak for what could happen to me."

"You can go away," she said. "You can disappear. You got here, didn't you? You say they don't know about me, right?"

"It's different," I said. "I cannot go away, not any more. And surely if they don't know I am with you at this moment they would have ways to find out. So you're involved whether you like it or not."

"There is nothing more to say," she said. "I was going to offer you

cheesecake and coffee for old times' sake—you are my only son after all, my only child—but there is no reason for it. You are hopeless. I want you to leave now."

"I want the money. Where is the money?"

"I won't tell you. Anyway, it's not here."

"You had places," I said. "You had a few places. I used to look when I was young. I would never take, almost never anyway, but I would look. I figure I could find it here from a standing start in an hour. It isn't that big a house. And you'd keep it close to your bed. I'd find it all right."

She stood, pushed her glasses under the cushion. "This is enough," she said. "This is quite enough—"

"I'm in bad trouble, Ma. I'm in real bad trouble." I had not called her Ma for years but the appeal had no weight. The woman simply has very little humanity and this is the truth. Maybe if she had been different I would not have turned out this way, although of course I do not wish to look for excuses. "I'm hurting," I said. "I'm hurting badly."

"So am I."

"All you ever thought of was how *you* were being hurt. You never thought of other people at all."

"I'll make it a police matter," she said. "That's what I'll do, that's how serious I am. I want you to leave."

"You used to threaten to call the cops on me, Ma. You used to threaten all the time. When I was six or seven you'd even go to the phone and pretend to dial. Do you have any idea what that kind of thing can do to a young kid growing up? The fear?"

For once she was quiet. She stood looking at me.

"You had no compassion, Ma," I said. "I looked for compassion for a long time but it was never there. Then I started to look for it elsewhere. From toteboards and people like the Quatorze."

She shook her head. "It's too late," she said.

"I know," I said. "I know it's too late."

I stared at her. These people aren't clowns in rubber suits, I thought, the plaid jackets and the language does not make them unwilling to kill. It is that kind of a world. It is a killing world. Underneath the rubber masks and noses it's murder.

My mother said, "I'll never give you the money. I'd rather die than give you the money. It's as simple as that."

"I know," I said. "I know. I know how you feel about money. You taught me the importance of it and that it was worth anything to try and get it. Anything except feeling, that is." My palms were sweating slightly. Her eyes fixed on me.

It's six to five, I thought. Six to five and pick 'em, vigorish either way which means that it's a ten percent cut off the top or maybe five because I am a great customer but still a losing proposition booked up all the way. Six to five. Six to five.

"You won't do it," she said. "You won't do it."

"Don't bet on it, Ma," I said quietly. "I might book it myself."

And then for a long time while I thought about a little of this and a lot of that, we stood there in the house built over the swamp on the far western tip of the ruined state of New Jersey and we looked at each other.

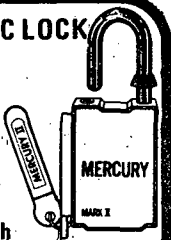


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Helen was a lady in the old-fashioned sense of the word . . .

THE RIGHT CIRCUMSTANCES



by

ROBERT EDWARD ECKELS

Fraser sat at the curve of the bar, watching the small comedy unfolding on the other side of the room. A woman had come in to sit alone at one of the tables clustered across from the bar and almost immediately afterwards a short man with a knobby, weak-chinned face and maybe one drink too many under his belt had decided to move in.

What intrigued Fraser was the woman herself. She wasn't the kind you'd normally expect to find in a bar. Not that she wasn't attractive

THE RIGHT CIRCUMSTANCES

35

enough. She was, in a late-thirtyish, early-fortyish kind of way. It was mainly that there was nothing flashy or smart about her. She was, Fraser decided, a lady, in the old-fashioned sense of the word. A little severe about the mouth maybe, but that might just be a reaction to the creep trying to pick her up. She was trying very hard to brush him off without creating a scene and not having very much luck.

Under the right circumstances, Fraser was willing to bet, her mouth might not be very severe at all. The trick would be finding the right circumstances.

He was still speculating on that when the waitress appeared at his elbow.

"Your table is ready in the dining room, Mr. Fraser," she said.

Fraser hesitated, looked back at the woman and her unwanted suitor, then on impulse slipped the waitress a folded bill and slid off his stool. "Tell me again in five minutes," he said and went over to tap the small man on the shoulder. "Excuse me," he said with heavy sarcasm, "but if you don't mind I'd like to sit with my wife."

The look of sudden irritation on the small man's face died as swiftly as it had come. His eyes slid away from Fraser's. "Sorry," he stammered. He looked back at the woman, then as quickly away again. "Uh—you know—sorry." He almost upset a chair at the next table in his haste to escape.

Fraser laughed and sat down across from the woman. "I hope you didn't mind," he said, "but I've always admired that line and this is the first time I've ever had a chance to use it. Frankly, the opportunity was just too good to pass up."

The woman smiled faintly. "It was effective anyway," she said.

"Oh, of course," Fraser said. "It had to be. It's how Clark Gable rescued Claudette Colbert in *It Happened One Night*, and the movie won an Academy Award. Are you an old movie buff?"

The woman shook her head. "No."

"Neither am I, really," Fraser said. "I just watch 'em on late television. Which goes to prove, I guess, that even insomnia can pay off." He leaned back and crossed his legs. "But if we're going to be married, we at least ought to know each other. I'm Sam Fraser."

"Helen Leonard."

"Pleased to know you, Helen Leonard," Sam said. He raised his glass in salute, then looked up as the waitress approached again.

"Your table's ready, Mr. Fraser," she said. The bill Sam had given her had been a five and she kept her face carefully straight.

Sam nodded but made no effort to rise. He looked thoughtfully over at the bar, where the small man had found a seat.

Helen smiled wryly. "It's all right," she said. "I don't think he'll be back. Not after what happened."

Sam shook his head. "I wouldn't be so sure," he said. "But, look, you're waiting for dinner too, aren't you? Why not join me?"

Helen smiled faintly and shook her head. "I don't think so," she said.

"Why not? You're not meeting anyone, are you?"

"No."

"Then two's better company than one any day. Besides—" he held up a warning finger—"it could be a lot worse. In the movie, Claudette ended up having to share a motel room with Clark. And if you don't think that was a big deal back in the thirties, think again." He snapped his fingers. "I know. Clark solved that by hanging a blanket between them. We can use our dinner napkins. They're very large here. And I promise to let you pay for your own dinner if you insist."

He had her laughing now. "When you put it that way," she said, "how can I refuse?"

As he followed her to the dining room, Sam deliberately caught the small man's eye. The man looked away.

Sam grinned to himself.

Helen sat quietly at first, busying herself with the menu and the trivia of ordering, afraid of the awkward silences that could grow up between two strangers thrown together—afraid too of what she felt were her own inadequacies in coping with the situation. Sam, however, was an infectious extrovert, with a well-developed knack for sensing when a conversational subject needed to be switched and a wide range of topics to turn to. By the end of the meal Helen found herself laughing and chatting as if they were better-than-average old friends.

When the check came, Sam paid it without comment. It seemed natural, and Helen didn't object. Afterwards, he walked her outside, waited while the attendant brought her car, then escorted her around to the driver's side, kissing her lightly on the cheek as they said goodbye.

"Good night, Helen," he said. "It was a short marriage—but a happy one." Then he stepped back and watched her drive off.

When she got home, Helen sat in front of her mirror for a long time, trying to sort out her emotions. She'd acted very much on impulse in going out alone tonight. It was something she rarely did. But Frank was on the road. A salesman's wife was supposed to get used to that, and she supposed she had, or she wouldn't have stayed his wife this long. But now the children had gone—Steve to college downstate, Beth to Atlanta with her new husband—and the walls had suddenly seemed to press in on her. And she had known that unless she got away from them—somehow—they would continue to press in until they literally drove her mad.

And what had been the result of her desperate venture? She smiled wryly at her reflection in the mirror. She'd been picked up, and, to top it off, in a bar of all places. How Frank would laugh at that.

Her smile faded and she touched her cheek where Sam had kissed her. And she knew she wasn't going to tell Frank.

The package came shortly after noon the next day, and after she had tipped the messenger who brought it Helen carried it into the house and, her curiosity more than a little piqued, opened it. Inside was a paperback book, *Karate Self-Taught*, and a note: "Just in case there's no husband around the next time you get in trouble."

She laughed. The note wasn't signed but it had been written on the back of a business card: "Samuel Fraser, Investment Counselor." A phone number was printed in one lower corner and on impulse again, and quickly before she could change her mind, Helen dialed it. Sam answered on the third ring.

"I just got your present," Helen said. "Thank you, though I hope I never need it."

"I hope you didn't mind," he said.

"Mind? No, I think it's funny. Only how did you know where to send it?"

"How did *you* know where to call?"

"Your phone number was on your card."

"And *your* number was on your car last night. Your license number. I simply memorized it and called a friend of mine in the police department, who in turn called a friend of his with the Department of

Motor Vehicles. *Voila*, mystery solved. Now, will you have dinner with me again tonight so I can continue to dazzle you?"

Helen was silent for a long moment. "I'm married, Sam," she said at last.

"I know," Sam said quietly. "I didn't miss the ring. But this isn't 1900 and I'm only asking you out to dinner—not to run away with me to Pawtucket or some equally exotic place. So how about it? That good old napkin wall is still as strong and as high as it ever was."

Helen smiled and in the end said yes, as she had known she would all along.

Sam had arranged for them to have the same table as before. This time, though, they spoke less during the meal. And afterwards, when the boy brought her car, Sam put Helen in the passenger seat and walked around and got into the driver's seat himself.

He drove quietly and swiftly back through the city, finally turning into a deserted parking garage below what appeared to be a small office building. Helen looked around apprehensively.

Sam cut the motor. "It's not sumptuous," he said, "but all mine just the same. I came into a little money some time back, so I bought this building, rented the bottom two floors to a couple of doctors and an optometrist, and converted the third into a mini-penthouse for myself. That way I get the income but never have to worry about seeing my tenants. Or vice versa." He got out and came around the car to open the door for her. "It's better upstairs," he said. "I guarantee it."

Helen sat without moving. "This isn't what I want, Sam," she said. "What isn't?"

"A one-night stand in a bachelor's pad."

Sam shook his head. "It wouldn't be that," he said. "Even if it never happened again, it wouldn't be that."

He held out his hand. After a long moment, Helen took it.

Much later she sat on the edge of his bed looking out at the darkened city through the huge panes that took up most of one wall. There had been a heart-pounding excitement to their love-making that she hadn't known in years and it had almost overwhelmed her in its intensity, but now in the aftermath her face was pensive. Sam lounged behind her in his dressing gown.

"A penny for your thoughts," he said.

"Frank," Helen said. This time she didn't rise to his teasing tone. "My husband. He's due home tomorrow."

Sam shrugged. "Then we won't see each other for a while," he said. "It won't be forever."

"That's not the point," Helen said. "How do I face him? What do I say?"

Sam sat up. "I'll tell you what you don't say," he said. "You don't say I'm sorry, I've sinned, please forgive me. All that would do is louse everything up. For everybody—you, me, him."

"Would you marry me, Sam, if it did?"

He looked away. "Is that what you want?" he said. "For us to get married?"

Helen looked at him soberly for a long time, then shook her head. "No," she said. "You're wonderful and exciting and fun and I love you. But, no, I don't want to marry you."

"Then why not keep it like it is?" he said. "Wonderful and exciting with me, and solid and safe with Frank. That's what you really want, isn't it?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Then there's no reason you shouldn't have it," he said, grinning. "Like I said, this isn't 1900. Women are liberated now. Or aren't they?"

Helen didn't smile back. "I don't want to hurt Frank," she said. "I don't want to hurt anybody."

"So then don't," Sam said. He put his hands on her shoulders and pulled her close. "There are many kinds of love," he said, "and what we have between us isn't taking anything from anybody, because it was never theirs. It's ours—for as long as we want it."

Time seemed to prove him right too. There was a brief moment of dread when Frank came home. He would, she was sure, see something different in her. He would *know*. But if she did betray any of her apprehension, he was too tired and preoccupied—or too trusting—to notice. That last part bothered her, but not for long, and she found herself slipping easily back into the old patterns as if Sam didn't exist, or existed on some other plane away from their comfortable world. So when the trouble came, she really wasn't prepared for it.

It was two months later. She and Sam had driven up the previous week to a little place he said he knew in Wisconsin where they could bask in the sun all day and make love all night, just the two of them together. It meant deceiving Frank, which she didn't like, because it brought her two worlds into uneasy collision. But as Sam kept reminding her, the opportunity was too good to pass up.

In the days that led up to their leaving she built up in her mind an image of a small cottage on a tree-lined slope and the two of them running on a white crescent beach at the foot of the slope. But as it turned out, Sam's "little place" was a motel—a nice one, with a big pool that was never crowded and a quiet lounge and restaurant where they had their own special table—and she told herself it didn't matter. But it did.

It mattered even more when she got home and received a brochure describing the motel in Monday's mail. At first she thought it was from Sam, a souvenir and reminder of their days together. But then she turned the envelope over and saw it was addressed to Frank.

The man called that afternoon. At least she assumed it was a man. The voice was garbled beyond any normal telephonic distortion.

"Mrs. Leonard? Tell me, Mrs. Leonard, do you open your husband's mail?"

Helen drew in her breath sharply. The voice chuckled. "I see you do. Not that it really matters. The message this morning would have puzzled him at best. On the other hand, there are photographs I could have sent, quite explicit photographs. They wouldn't puzzle him at all."

"Who are you?" Helen managed to say. "What do you want?"

The voice hardened. "Who I am doesn't matter, now does it, Mrs. Leonard? What counts is the pictures I have and whether you want your husband to see them. I'm not bluffing about the photos, Mrs. Leonard. I have them, and if you don't want them sent to your husband—at his office, say, where he'll be sure to receive them—you'll put five thousand dollars in small bills in a plain envelope and drop it off at the phone booth on the corner of Kennilworth and Ames at midnight tonight. You understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes," Helen said. Sudden panic hit her. "No, wait—" But she was speaking into a dead phone.

For several long moments she stood unmoving. Then she reached out reflexively to break the connection and dial Sam. He answered almost immediately.

"I have to see you," she said. "Now."

Sam turned the motel brochure over carefully and studied the back.

"It came in the mail this morning," Helen said. It was later that same day and they were in his apartment. It was the first time Helen had been there in the daytime and the view from the windows was grey and dingy. "The man who sent it says he has photographs of us—together." She stumbled slightly over the word. "He says he'll send them to Frank unless I pay him five thousand dollars."

Sam continued to study the brochure. "Do you have the money?" he said.

"In savings. But, my God, Sam, a withdrawal that size would wipe out the account! Frank would find out sooner or later, and I could never explain." She looked at him pleadingly. "It might be better to face it now. At least it would be honest."

"No," Sam said sharply. "We can't do that." He wouldn't meet her eyes. "I never brought this up," he said, "because it had nothing to do with us. But I'm married too. Neither of us has worked at the marriage for a long time now. There's never been a divorce, though, mainly because any fault that could be proved would all be on her side. But this kind of a scandal—with me involved—would be all she needed to go into court and take me for everything I have."

"What am I supposed to do," Helen said bitterly, "feel sorry for you?"

"No," Sam said. "The point is we're in this together. And we'll get out of it together."

"How? By paying him what he wants?"

"Exactly," Sam said. He shrugged. "I can scrape up a couple of thousand, but you'll have to put up the rest. There's no way around it."

"And when he asks for more?"

"That's what we've got to prevent," Sam said. "But we need time and we need something to go on. The way it is right now, the cards are all stacked in his favor. He knows us, but all we have is a voice on the telephone that could belong to anyone. But he has to expose him-

self when he picks up the money. Where did he tell you to make the delivery?"

"By a telephone booth near Kennilworth and Ames at midnight to-night."

Sam nodded. "Good," he said. "I know the area. It's not far from here. Small businesses mainly, so at that time of night it'll be deserted. There are plenty of doorways and alleyways around for me to hide in and get a look at him when he makes the pickup. At the very least I'll get the license number from his car and that will be a good start toward tracking him down."

"And when you do," Helen said, "what will you do then?"

Sam looked at her curiously, then grinned. "Nothing desperate, I assure you," he said. "I'm no killer. But I don't have to be. Once we know who he is, it becomes a Mexican stand-off. If he exposes us, we expose him. And blackmail's a felony in every jurisdiction I know." He rose and went over to her. "It's going to be all right," he said. "Believe me." He put his arms around her, and after a moment the tension left her shoulders and he pulled her close against him.

Shortly after, Helen drove home to pick up her bankbook so she could make the withdrawal before the bank closed for the day. Almost as an afterthought, she picked up the pistol that Frank had bought her years before for protection while he was away. It was a .22 automatic, very compact. It fit easily into her purse.

Sam approached the telephone booth warily, stopping just outside the small area of semi-brightness. It was 11:30 and as he had predicted the intersection was deserted. He continued to stand where he was for several moments, then, finally satisfied there was no one to observe him, he cut across the street into a dark doorway with an unimpeded view of the booth. He lit a cigarette, cupping his hands around the match to hide the flame, and settled down to wait.

The sound of tires on pavement brought him alert, and he glanced automatically down at his watch. He could just make out the luminous dial. Five minutes to twelve. Was it Helen coming early—or someone else? Not sure, but alert for either possibility, he ground out the cigarette and crouched farther back into the shadows.

Moments later Helen's car pulled to a stop beside the booth and she

got out. She stood for several seconds looking nervously up and down the street, then stooped to deposit her package. Sam was suddenly aware of his heart pounding wildly in his chest. The flow of adrenalin made his hands tremble, but he held himself back until Helen had driven off and he could no longer hear the car. Then, as if released from a spring, he dashed out across the street, snatched up the package, and ran back to the shelter of a different, closer doorway.

Twenty-six hundred dollars. He knew the exact amount because they'd counted it together earlier in his apartment after Helen had brought it back from the bank. He breathed heavily. It wasn't as good as five thousand, of course, but it was better than nothing. Much better than nothing.

Gradually he brought himself back under control and when his hands were steadier he opened the package and broke the money down into packets that would fit unobtrusively into his pockets. Finished, he crumpled the wrapping to throw it away, then on second thought carried it with him to deposit carefully in a trash bin several blocks away.

He was glad it was over. He hadn't really liked doing this to Helen—just as he hadn't liked doing it to Ceil or Mary or any of the others. But the affair was bound to end sooner or later anyway, and expenses on the building were running higher than he'd expected. And they had all practically asked for it anyway.

By the time he reached his car he was whistling.

Helen was waiting for him at his apartment, sitting on the sofa, a jumble of cigarette stubs in the ashtray before her.

Sam shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said. "I thought I had it all psyched out. But whoever he is, he's a lot smarter than we gave him credit for. He must have figured we'd try to make him, because he was wearing a ski mask. A goddamn ski mask this time of year!"

"You got the license number though?"

Sam shook his head again. "It was smeared with mud. Completely unreadable. Next time though—"

Helen's eyes came up to meet his steadily. "There isn't going to be a next time, Sam."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there shouldn't even have been a first time. But I wanted to give you every chance to prove I was wrong."

"Wait a minute," Sam said.

"No," she said. "You made one mistake this afternoon, Sam. You said all we had was a voice on the telephone that could belong to anybody. But I hadn't said anything about a phone call. So how did you know that's what it had been, and not a note or a letter?"

Sam wet his lips. "Hey, come on," he said. "You can't hang a guy for jumping to a conclusion."

"No, but I can wonder. So I didn't just drive off tonight after leaving the money. I cut over onto a side street and parked where I could watch. I saw the whole thing."

Sam shook his head. "No," he said, "you were gone. I made—"

He broke off as Helen continued to look up at him.

"That was your second mistake, Sam," she said. She took the gun from her purse. "I want my money back," she said.

Sam hesitated for several long seconds, then shrugged. "No point beating a dead horse, I guess," he said. He took out the money, except for six hundred in his inside jacket pocket, and set it on the coffee table next to the ashtray. "I guess you were smarter than I gave you credit for, Helen," he said.

Helen looked at the money without moving to pick it up. "Why did you do it, Sam?"

Sam shrugged again. "What can I say?" he said. "I needed the money. I wish it was different. But the opportunity was there and I just couldn't pass it up."

Helen looked past him. "Like that night in the bar," she said, "when that little man tried to pick me up." Her face began to work. "Damn you," she cried. "That's all I ever was to you, wasn't I? An opportunity."

Sam thrust out his hands defensively. "No," he said. "No, I—"

But her finger had already tightened around the trigger and the sharp crack of the automatic cut him off before he could finish.

The April issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale March 15.

Every night the music was the same but not the same . . .

THE MUSIC FROM DOWNSTAIRS



by
**JOHN
LUTZ**

Whoever he was, Lorna, he blew a beautiful trumpet. Like Gabriel.

I know what you and the people at the church must think of me, and, believe it or not, that's the worst part. I know most of all what *you* must think, and sometimes at night I just wish I could die and be rid of the shame.

But it mustn't be in God's plan for me to die yet.

The apartment over Nat's Club was all I could afford. I'd never have

moved into a place like that unless I was sure I'd find a job, and that I'd be able to move before sending for you.

But there isn't much demand here in the city for a man who spent twenty years working in a coal mine. I guess, what with the mine being closed for six months now, Haleville is in pretty rough shape. We were wise to decide to move, but it was one of those things that didn't happen to work out, especially for you and the kids. Believe me, that's who I'm thinking of most.

Not being a drinker, I never set foot in Nat's Club. The entrance to my upstairs apartment was in back, and after a glance or two at the flashing red neon sign over the door, I never paid any attention to what went on there.

Except for late at night, when the trumpet player went into his solo.

Some people might have called the police and complained about the noise. But from the first the music soothed me. Those clear notes would come drifting up through the bare wood floors and fill the dark bedroom with a peacefulness I could almost touch. It was like the sad-sweet core of life, set to music. I'd lie there for hours thinking about you and the kids, and how it would be when I found a job and sent for you. I was glad then that the mine had closed. I always hated working underground.

Every night those gold rising notes would carry me off somewhere until I slept, making all the walking I'd done that day, all the useless job interviews and applications, seem not to matter.

After a while, the trumpet music somehow stayed with me through the days. It got so I could almost turn it off and on, like an imaginary radio that played the same lonely notes over and over.

Did I tell you the trumpet music was lonely? It wasn't a song you could name. It was the same every night but not the same. "Improvisation," I found out they call it. That's music that's supposed to come from the soul, and whoever played the trumpet must have had a soul like mine.

Lorna, I missed you. I swear that's what caused it. I was lonely, and one night there was this Doris Rollins at the bus stop, and we talked. It began innocently. It's important to me that you know that.

She never had what happened in mind any more than I did. She told me all about her family, and I told her all about you and Billy and Jill. I could sense she was lonely too, and we became friends.

About that time the trumpet music changed. Or maybe it was me that changed. The same full rich notes would drift up at night, but now there was something more forlorn in them. Not that the music wasn't more beautiful than before—more beautiful than we even heard in church, Lorna—but now it was sad and kind of yearning-like.

The music was playing when Doris phoned me. It was eleven o'clock at night and she was crying. Her husband had beat her, she said. She needed a friend, Lorna. She came to me, and I became more than a friend. I didn't dream you'd ever find out, much less that things would turn out this way.

She came to me often after that, in the early hours of the morning, before she went to work. That first night she'd gone back to her husband—she said she always did, that she had no choice, for the kids' sake. I guess that's what life's all about, Lorna, finding out we don't have the choices we thought we had. Now I'm down to no choices at all.

I was stretched out on my back on the bed with my eyes closed, listening to the music from downstairs, when I heard the door buzzer. It was past eleven-thirty, so I was surprised to see Doris at the door. She started to cry as soon as she looked at me.

Naturally I thought her husband had beat her up again, but that wasn't it. I helped her cross the room and sit down in the worn-out armchair. She told me she was pregnant.

I was stunned, Lorna. But even standing there with the wind almost knocked out of me by the news, I got to thinking. She was a married woman, and the odds were good that her husband was the father.

But she told me her husband couldn't be the father, that he'd had some sort of sickness that had left him sterile. And besides, he hadn't slept with her in months. It was his sickness that caused him to beat her.

She said she'd told him about us, that she'd had to. And that now I had to tell you.

It was strange what happened then. All I could think about was my loneliness for you, and I felt first a great sadness, then a hate and anger for Doris—a rage. I don't remember picking up the ashtray and hitting her on the head with it. They didn't believe that in court, but it's true.

They didn't believe much of what I said in court. Not after I told

them about the trumpet music and they told me that Nat's Club had been closed for two months before Doris died.

Now I'll spend the rest of my life in a cell like this one, and I guess I deserve to. They say I'm a menace, even to myself. That's why they've taken everything away from me that might be used as a weapon. At least they think they have.

And if it was lonely in that apartment over the club, it's more lonely here. And monotonous. It's sameness that can drive a man really crazy. Like day after day in the mines.

The only thing to occupy my mind here is the drummer in the cell below. I figure he must be a professional drummer, because he has a perfect sense of rhythm.

He beats on the walls constantly. It helps.

I know you have to leave, Lorna, but before you go, will you move a little closer to the bars? So I can reach you.

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Taylor's wife was a home-grown neurotic in full flower . . .

MURPHY'S DAY



I could hear Henry Taylor breathing in my ear through the receiver, and he could probably hear me breathing in his.

"Twenty thousand," he had said, "isn't a hell of a lot of ransom to ask in this day and age," and I'd agreed with him. Now we were thinking about it, each in his own way.

I'd taken his call at ten-thirty in my apartment. He was at his office and had just finished a conversation with the kidnapper of his wife,

Bella. A man had just told him he could have her back for \$20,000 and I think it bruised his pride. Twenty thousand dollars is what you pay for a car, not a wife. I would have put him in the hundred-thousand-dollar ransom class, minimum; and he would put himself higher than that, I thought. He had the inflamed ego of all self-made zillionaires.

"How does he want it?" I said finally.

"He didn't say what denominations, Sam." Taylor sounded irritated, as though he would fire the man for inefficiency if he knew who he was. "He said to put the money in a five-by-twelve-inch manila envelope."

"What?"

He repeated the instructions and I asked, a little stiffly, "Well, Henry, are you gonna?" He was sounding as though maybe the whole thing should be handled by his secretary. I'm not too fond of Mr. Henry Taylor, with whom I'd done business before.

"Of course I am," he said indignantly, and again we breathed into each other's ear.

"Tell me what he said," I said. "All of it."

"He said he had Bella and would do unspeakable things to her if I didn't pay him twenty thousand dollars."

"Are you quoting exactly? Did he actually say 'unspeakable things'?"

"Yes, he did."

"What kind of voice—the rhythm, the tone? Cultured? Educated?"

"I would say educated. But muffled, as if spoken through a handkerchief. Sam, will you help me?"

"What else did he say?"

"To be in the lobby of the Bancroft Building with the money sealed in the envelope and stand in front of the third telephone booth from the end at exactly one-thirty this afternoon."

"You personally?"

"Yes, damn it—me."

"I suppose you've got a board meeting," I said snottily, "that'll interfere."

"You can damn well believe, Train, that I've got better things to do with my time than this!" He'd almost snarled it and I grinned into the mirror over my telephone table. Taylor was a self-made tycoon (like most of them—I mean, who else would make one?) in the import-export business and had more than his share of arrogance.

"When did you see her last?" I said more civilly.

"This morning, at home. She left the house around seven-thirty. I was eating breakfast."

"Where'd she go?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't ask?"

More heavy breathing in my ear—then, aggressively: "No. I didn't ask."

"How was she dressed?"

"I—"

"You didn't notice. O.K., Henry, few husbands do. But it would be nice to know where she was headed, wouldn't it? I mean like for a swim, or what?"

"You'll help me with this, Sam?"

"What would you like me to do—lend you the money? O.K., I'm kidding, but can you raise it that fast?" It became an honest question before I got it all out; I'd damn near had to sue him once to collect a modest fee.

"Of course I can," he said.

"Could you raise—say, fifty—that fast?"

"Possibly not. Why? All he wants—"

"I was just wondering," I said. "What else did our man say?"

"The usual stuff. Don't call the cops, nothing but unmarked bills, etcetera."

I paused, listening to the echo of the easy, casual voice, and thinking sardonically, How quickly we adapt—to anything. Kidnapping was nearly epidemic on a global scale, spreading like some new game of chance, and everybody was in on its special language and rules. The "usual stuff." He should have been raging mad—and scared.

But I let all that pass. I'm a professional, I keep telling myself, with no values but those the client demands. The eyes in the mirror looked shifty. "What line did he call you on," I asked, "your private one, or the company's?"

"My private. Bella probably gave it to him."

"Did you ask?"

"No."

"O.K." I had a mental picture of the lobby of the Bancroft Building with its dozen or so phone booths toward the rear just past the double

bank of elevators. "At one-thirty I'll be in the fourth booth from the end. After you take your call I'll bump into you as you leave the booth and you drop something—the envelope, maybe. While we're fumbling around with that, smiling amiably all the while, tell me what he said. O.K.?"

He was dubious. "Shouldn't we meet beforehand somewhere?"

"No. If you're being watched, you're being watched starting now. You concentrate on getting the money—and the right size envelope. I suspect that's important. I'll see you at one-thirty."

I hung up and the face in the mirror wasn't smiling now. There had been two other kidnappings in the San Francisco area in the last fifteen days, both pure extortion, both similar to this in all respects but the amount demanded. It's another way the poor have found to bedevil the rich, and it works more often than not.

I got up, went into my kitchen, and poured a cup of lukewarm coffee from the morning's pot. I would have to change clothes. I was dressed for tennis and would have been playing right now except that my partner had phoned a little earlier and cancelled out. He'd slipped getting out of bed and sprained his wrist—or so he said. Outside my window it was a bushy-tailed, blue-eyed day under a crackling sun. A dangerous day. A day for Murphy's law to prevail, a day for mirrors to crack at an angel's glance. More unprofessional ruminations—but any day Taylor replaces tennis has got to be bad. Besides, I was remembering the trouble I'd had collecting from him before. Like most of the rich, he figures it should all flow in and none out. That's how they get that way.

The Bancroft Building is about a twenty-minute walk from my apartment on Van Ness, and I was there at one-fifteen. I bought a paper from the newsstand at the front of the lobby and glanced around, but saw nothing unusual. A man was in the fourth phone booth from the end and when he left I replaced him. The third booth was empty and stayed that way until Taylor arrived at two or three minutes before the half hour and stepped into it, glaring at me through the glass. At exactly one-thirty I heard the phone ring in his booth and I watched him raise it to his ear, listen, frown, and then hang up.

I almost knocked him off his feet when we collided a few seconds later outside the booths, and he wasn't smiling amiably as he stooped to retrieve the bulky envelope he'd dropped. He'd lost his usual cool

arrogance. Maybe the reality had finally penetrated—some bad guys had got hold of his wife.

"He wants me to go immediately to a phone booth on the thirty-eighth floor of this building," he said gutturally, "and do what it says on the top of page three hundred and eighty of the phone book in that booth." He straightened up. "Come with me, Sam."

"No. And smile, damn it!" The thing was beginning to become vaguely clear to me, like the sound of a distant band approaching. "Go do it!"

I walked back toward the newsstand up front and stopped there, looking back as Taylor disappeared aboard an elevator. Then the music got louder in my head and I walked briskly, nearly running, to the big bronze mailbox implanted on the wall between two elevators and looked at the collection schedule on the front. The next pickup was at 1:40. It was now 1:37. Two letters flashed down the glass chute into the box as I stood there before moving away again, back toward the newsstand.

Taylor must be on the thirty-eighth floor by now, reading the instructions in the phone book, which would tell him to drop the fat envelope down the mail chute on the wall, and then a minute or two later, a mailman—fake, I was telling myself—would pick it up and take it away. The music was blaring now in my head as loudly as a passing parade.

I saw the guy in the mailman's uniform come in from the alley behind the building, pass the line of phone booths, and angle across the lobby to the big bronze box. He was small and skinny and seemed nervous, his uniform ill-fitting, too wide in the shoulders.

I looked around for a cop, but there wasn't one in sight. Then I trotted out to the street as the fake mailman emptied the bronze box into his canvas carrying sack. I saw nothing but pedestrians. (Where are the cops when you need them?) I nearly ran back through the Bancroft lobby out to the alley where the U.S. Mail truck was parked and there was no cop there either, but the door of the mail truck was unlocked—further indication that the guy was a fake—and I boarded it quickly and stepped back into the body, out of sight. The guy he'd swiped the uniform from wasn't in the truck, so he must be someplace else, maybe dead. I got out my old Walther .38, glad now I'd brought it along. Sweat began to build around my eyes as I waited.

He looked as innocent as Bambi the Fawn as he got back in the truck, but I knew better. The Walther traced a wiggly zero between his eyes and he slumped weakly backwards onto the cab floor.

"No!" he said.

"Yes!" I said. "Get up and drive this thing to the Central Police Station."

"No," he said, even more feebly. "Don't shoot—please. It's a felony to—rob the United States—"

"You don't say," I said. Another band was marching over the horizon of my mind, dimly heard, but coming fast. "Where's the other guy?"

"What other guy?"

Oh boy, I thought. "You're an honest-to-goodness mailman, aren't you?"

"What the hell did you think I was?" He was getting some strength back.

I lifted the canvas carrying sack from his lap and dumped the contents on the floor of the truck at my feet. Taylor's big manila envelope stuck out in the pile of ordinary business letters and I picked it up, half gloating but completely puzzled.

"That's a felony," the mailman said.

"Yeah, I know, and a bullet between the eyes is fatal—facts of life." I began to step over his legs to the door. He grabbed the envelope and we got into a ludicrous tug-of-war over the thing, one corner of it ripping off in his hand before I finally got over him and out to the alley, mad now. I put the Walther in his left nostril and said softly, "You forget it, I forget it—right? You shouldn't have left your door unlocked."

He closed his eyes and seemed to go to sleep. I put the Walther back in its holster and Taylor's money in my side coat pocket and walked toward the street where the sun danced off the passing cars like laser beams.

I was back in my apartment at quarter after two, feeling some word not yet coined, a blend of miffed and puzzled—mizzled, maybe. *Thoroughly* mizzled. I didn't want to call Taylor, who was no doubt back in his office making money, because I didn't know what I wanted to say to him. But, I called his home and after some jockeying around with a foreign-accented maid I got the housekeeper, currently Mrs.

Malvern. In the nine months I've been acquainted with the Taylor ménage, there have been three housekeepers. Some people I know don't change shirts that often.

"Mrs. Taylor, please," I said with a certain hauteur I'm capable of when speaking to housekeepers. "I know she's not there, but would you kindly tell me where she can be reached?"

"The playhouse, I would think," Mrs. Malvern said. "She's in rehearsal."

I groped. "Ah yes, the—er—"

"Marin Mummery Society," Mrs. Malvern said. "In Sausalito."

"Of course," I said, thanked her, and hung up.

Isabella Taylor, I remembered, had been an actress of sorts before Henry married her some twenty years ago. Maybe she thought she still was.

I'd put the coffee on to warm when I came in and was pouring myself a cup when someone knocked on my door, an almost unheard-of occurrence. People don't knock on my door unless they've phoned beforehand, and since Murphy was stalking the streets today I got out the Walther before I opened the door with a snap and stepped slightly aside, ready to blast.

A tall, thin, cruel-faced man was standing there, his right hand in his jacket pocket holding a gun pointing at my heart. For an instant it was a Mexican stand-off, but then the cruelty on his face melted like wax and his blue-jeaned knees began to shake. I'd never seen him before. I slowly eased the pressure off the Walther's trigger. My shot would have torn his chin off.

"Don't!" he whispered and pulled his hand from the jacket pocket, empty. "Look—no g-g-gun." I grabbed him by the hand and drew him through the door and, just for the hell of it, twirled and dropped him to the floor on his face, my knee at the base of his spine in the follow-through.

"Speak," I said. "Where is she?"

"Oh, God," he blubbered into the rug. "Oh, God. Please—"

"Where is she?"

"In a motel. She's waiting. Please, that hurts."

I stood up and watched him roll over slowly. Then he sat up, rubbing his arm, and I stuck the Walther in my belt.

"What motel?"

"Just outside town—Sausalito. The Bayside, or Bayview, something like that. I've got the phone number."

"Have you called her yet?"

"No."

"You were going to filch the ransom money first."

He looked up. "It seemed insane to—just to let it go. Twenty thousand dollars! We could use it, believe me. I mean—just to let it go?"

"Who's 'we'?"

"The Marin Mummerys. I'm the director." His chin lifted a little with a touch of pride. He had an actor's protean face. It looked as honest now as a scoutmaster's.

"What's your name?" I said.

"Paul Travers. What's yours?" He tried a winsome smile.

"Sam Train. Where were you in the Bancroft Building—on the thirty-eighth floor?"

"Yes."

"You phoned Mr. Taylor from there at one-thirty—to the booth in the lobby?"

"Yes."

"And when he showed up on the thirty-eighth floor you went down to the lobby. Did you know the mail would get picked up at exactly one-forty?"

"Yes. I'd checked the mailman a half dozen times. He was never more than a minute off. Like clockwork. I figured he'd be gone before Taylor got back down to the lobby."

"And then what?" I said. "You weren't planning to hijack the mail, were you?"

"No." Travers shivered. He was still frightened, still rubbing his arm. "I couldn't do that," he said. "Violence makes me ill. I was going to point out to him that there was no addressee on the envelope and tell him that I'd dropped it down the chute by mistake. I was going to ask him to give it back."

"And then what, Travers? You saw me in his truck in the alley and figured I was doing what? Sticking him up?"

"Yes!" His eyes flashed with new spirit. "I thought it was just one of those awful things—that for the first time in the history of the universe *that* particular postal truck was getting held up—and I got mad."

"And followed me here."

"Yes, getting madder by the minute. I simply couldn't let you take *my* money, so I hyped myself into acting like the world's deadliest gunsel and taking it back; but—" He shrugged.

"At the critical moment, the act failed. You fell apart."

"Yes. When I saw that horrible gun. I told you I can't stand violence."

"Who thought this up?" I said. "You?"

"Mostly, yes. The details were mine. The idea of faking a kidnapping was strictly Bella's, but when she insisted the ransom couldn't be more than twenty thousand, I thought of the mail-chute thing. I used to work in the Bancroft Building. You can get twenty thousand into one of those envelopes if you try."

"You tried?"

"Yes."

"What was the idea, Travers? Was she testing him?"

"Yes, testing his love for her, if any, and also—mostly, I think—just to get his attention. She's been in four plays for the Mummies this past year and he hasn't come to any one of them. I mean, think about that. It became vital for her to let him know she's alive. Do you understand, Mr. Train?"

"Yes. But why the twenty-thousand limit?"

Travers had quit rubbing his arm and had gotten a cigarette lit and going. He had long supple fingers that liked to keep moving.

"I'm not sure," he said. "I guess it's because she had no idea of collecting it and simply didn't want him to lose any more than that. The idea of recovering the stuff was strictly mine, Mr. Train. She knows nothing about it."

"Maybe," I said, "she was afraid of overpricing herself. Some husbands I know would pay that much and more to get rid—"

"I know," said Travers. "I know some too."

"Would Taylor?"

"I don't know. It's almost unthinkable though, isn't it?"

"No," I said. "Not on a day like today. Do *you* love her, Travers?"

"Yes, I do. But platonically, Mr. Train. She's very talented. She's very good."

"She loves *him*?"

"Yes. Without limit."

"That doesn't bother you?"

"No, sir. I was trying to help her. What bothers me is her unhappiness."

He was rubbing his arm again and knocking ashes on my rug. I don't smoke, but I do have ashtrays and like people to use them. On Thursday, Martha, my cleaning woman, would pounce on that ash like a cat on a baby mouse. Then I'd catch hell. "Get up," I said. "There's an ashtray in the kitchen. Also coffee. Besides, aren't you supposed to be calling her about now?"

"Yes."

"What are you going to tell her?"

"That he delivered the money. That's all she wants to know. Just that he delivered the money. She'll think it means he still loves her, and maybe he'll even come to opening night this Friday."

I poured two cups of coffee and drank some of mine, looking out the window at Van Ness Avenue two floors below. The sun was still coming down like Apollo throwing knives and my mind boggled at the million dramas going on out there that I would never know about, that wouldn't open on Friday and close three weeks later, but would go on forever, unnoticed and unreviewed, important only to their audiences of one or two. All she wanted to know was that he still loved her and she'd commit a half dozen felonies to find it out. Wow, Murphy. I thought, go home and sleep it off before you bring it all down around our ears.

"And when you tell her he delivered the money," I said. "Then what?"

"Then later today, around five, five-thirty, I'll drop her off on the road near her house—with tape marks on her wrists and a few other touches—and then she'll stumble into the house and they'll have this fantastic coming together in the vestibule—" His voice trailed away sardonically.

"You don't believe that's what'll happen?"

He shrugged. "It's a fairy tale, isn't it?"

He was probably right, but I didn't say so, my recall of her clearer now. She was an energetic, eager-eyed, blondish woman of forty or so with not enough to do, a home-grown neurotic in full flower. She probably should have had four or five kids; but Taylor, I knew, couldn't be bothered. "What was supposed to have happened this

morning?" I said. "How was she supposed to have been snatched?"

"The story is, I phoned her to come down to the playhouse at eight o'clock this morning for some special rehearsal, but she was intercepted in the parking lot by the kidnappers—a man and woman she'd never seen before. She was blindfolded and taken somewhere in a rattly old car. Then she was forced to disclose her husband's unlisted office phone number before being made to take some kind of a sleeping pill. That's all she'll remember until she's dumped out of the same car near her house. And of course she'll take a couple of her own sleeping pills an hour or so beforehand, so her dopiness will be real. Neat, eh?" He smiled theatrically.

"It has the virtue," I conceded, "of simplicity. Her car's at the playhouse parking lot?"

"Yes."

"You'd better call her," I said. "The phone's over there. Tell her you'll be there in a half hour or so. Don't tell her I'll be with you."

"Mr. Train?"

"What?"

"Would you donate a thousand dollars of that ransom money you've got in your pocket to the Mariñ Mummies for a new curtain? We desperately need a new curtain." He was good. He was a man of about thirty-five, but his face shone just then like a choirboy's. I wanted to ask him to make that cruel face for me again, but it didn't seem fitting.

I smiled. "It's not mine to give, Travers."

"Would he even miss it?"

I weighed the question. "Like a tooth," I said judiciously. "Go call her."

At first she was frightened at the sight of me, and then pleased when I said quickly, "Henry hired me to find you. I'm Sam Train—remember?"

"Of course," she said, and flung the flimsy motel door wide. "Henry *truly* hired you?" She was inordinately pleased.

"Yes. Right after he got the call from your kidnapper here." I gestured toward Travers, who was beginning to understand this caper was a bit more serious than a drawing-room charade. We'd driven over in my car and I'd lectured him on the facts of life—at least the few I understand.

"He's got the money too," Travers said in feigned admiration. "He filched it from the mailman."

"Oh?" Mrs. Taylor was wide-eyed. "Should you have done that?"

"From your point of view, why not? What's one more crime on the list?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"As well you might. You're in the process at this very moment of committing a dozen or so felonies, and I'm in the process of deciding whether to conspire with you in them or have you arrested."

"You wouldn't!"

It was a way of getting her full attention and I pressed it a bit further. "You expect me to tell Henry this kidnapping is for real?"

"Of course."

"You expect me to deliver you and the money back to your husband without another word about it?"

"Of course."

She meant it. She needed some sign of his love and would start a war to achieve it. I glanced at Travers, who was looking bland, and then at my watch, which said 3:55. Murphy still had several hours of daylight left and whatever plan I made to handle this contretemps would have to be made with care.

"What we might do," Travers said, "is follow the original plan."

"No. I want to be there when they meet. I want to deliver her straight into her husband's arms."

"You want the credit, is that it?"

"No. I've got the credit already. I want to be there to hand him my bill. I don't trust the mails. What you'll tell him," I said, turning to Mrs. Taylor, "is that you woke up in this strange motel room, stumbled outside to a phone booth, and called me because you remembered me from before and didn't think he'd want the police in on it. Luckily, I happened to be home. O.K.?"

"O.K.," she said. "That means we *both* called you."

"Right."

"Should I take my Seconals now?"

"Any time."

"And me?" Travers said.

"You vanish," I said, and went over and sat down at the rickety motel table and put through a call to the cause of all this.

It was 5:15 when he steered his mole-grey Mercedes SL-480 between the brick gateposts of his drive and toolled up the long curving approach to the house. I'd parked my Dart a quarter of a block away and was waiting because I wanted him there first. Now I followed him in, Bella coming awake in the front seat beside me, looking right for the role of recent kidnappee. Travers had done a makeup job on her, tape marks around the wrists, a discreet rip at the shoulder of the dress, a dirt smear across the forehead, and the Seconals. She was putting her heart in it. She wanted it to work more than anything else in the world, and I was going to see that it did.

My phone call to his office had pulled him out of a conference and at first he'd asked if I couldn't call back later. When I finally got him I told him to be home by five o'clock to greet his recovered wife or I would personally bring him back in several parts. The tardy fifteen minutes I'd give him—a tie-up on the bridge, maybe—but he'd played it awfully close.

I took her in through the kitchen door and we found him in the den mixing a drink, as though this were the end of any ordinary day. Then he frowned, his eyes flicking past me to her, and he leaned dramatically against the frame of the door. He put down his glass and stepped toward her, and in one of those magical retrogressions they were both young again and the love glowed between them for an instant like heat lightning. He said, "Bella," thickly, and his arms enclosed her like wings.

This, I thought, is too good to be true—and of course it was. It couldn't last any more than lightning can be fixed in the sky. But it had happened and maybe the power of the thing would linger through enough time to matter.

It made Taylor self-conscious. "Sam!" he said heartily. "Lord God, how can I thank you for this? I can't tell you how frightened I was."

"Yeah," I said.

"Well, I suppose," Bella said almost coyly, still pressed against his chest, "you *could* pay him."

"Why, certainly," Taylor said, still hearty.

"No need, Henry," I said. "I'll just keep"—I pulled the envelope of ransom money from my pocket, torn corner up—"this."

The euphoric moment shattered. Henry turned a pasty tone of grey and Bella, with some vestigial sense of values, said, "Why, Mr. Train,

that's ridiculous! Twenty thousand dollars!"

"No!" Henry said, and then cleared his throat and said it again. "No. It's perfectly all right, darling. You're worth twenty times that much to me."

"I won't hear of it," Bella said, but she was pleased.

"Mrs. Taylor," I said, "you're right. Give me a piece of paper and I'll tote up a bill for Henry right now. Besides, I borrowed this from the U.S. Postal Service and I'll have to turn it back in for processing. Right, Henry?"

"Right! Oh, right!"

Mrs. Taylor, out of her depth with anything vaguely legalistic, was mollified, and Henry seemed visibly delighted with the plan.

I grinned at him satanically as he pressed his wife back against his chest and mouthed something at me over her shoulder. But I turned and went to the desk in the corner of the elegant room to do up my bill.

"Dear Henry," I wrote on a piece of his wife's scented notepaper, "my charges to you are as follows:

"(1) Attend the opening next Friday night of your wife's play.

"(2) Buy the Marin Mummers a new curtain for their stage. A *good* one.

"(3) Send me a check for whatever amount you think it'll take for me to keep my big mouth shut.

"Affectionately, Sam."

I folded the note, sealed it in an envelope, and wrote on the outside: "Personal. For Mr. Henry Taylor."

He was mixing drinks again, Bella slumping in a chair, the Seconals once more at work. A pair, I thought, uniquely deserving of each other, with lovelorn Bella getting the worst of it. I put the envelope on the bar next to Taylor and he said, *sotto voce*, "Sam, don't go—I want to talk to you—"

"Sorry, Henry," I said. "I've got to meet a guy named Murphy downtown and if I'm late by thirty seconds, he's apt to kill me." I didn't want to hear his explanation just then, knowing it might even be convincing, and I didn't want to be convinced. I wanted only to leave them alone together and give the small tender thing between them a chance to grow, because they'd both taken high risks in giving it life.

I said goodbye quietly and went back out to the Dart parked on the apron in front of the seven-car garage. I stood there for a moment, debating. I had a choice to make. I could either keep the envelope as a kind of souvenir of the day they let Murphy loose, or take it over to one of the garbage cans lined up alongside the garage and dispose of it there. I went over to the garbage cans.

I put my finger in the torn corner of the manila envelope and ripped it open along the top. Then I took one of the bills from the thick mass of them and put it in my pocket. That one I'd keep just for the hell of it. The rest I dumped into the garbage can because I didn't know any kids I could give play money to.

Then I drove home. Very carefully.

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He knew they were trying to get rid of him . . .

ROCK'S LAST ROLE

by

WILLIAM
BANKIER



The Prepington Repertory Theatre was not immune to the afflictions of its time. Audiences were declining as costs were escalating. But the actor-manager of the Prepington had something else to worry about. He had to find a way to persuade Aubrey Rock to retire.

"Did you speak to him?" asked Sybil Simon in her domineering voice. She played all the Noel Coward upper-class ladies and was never out of character.

ROCK'S LAST ROLE

65

"Till I began to bore myself," said Lance Haldane. "He just won't take the hint. Old Aubrey feels he is at the peak of his powers. He thanks me for being concerned but insists he can carry on for many more seasons."

"Then you must be more direct, Lance darling. Tell him the company is exhausted and fed up and completely sick and tired of his mannerisms on stage. He must be gone at the end of the current production."

"Sybil, love. I can hardly put it like that."

"Put it any way you like, Lance darling. But make him understand." Sybil's paint-and-powder face twisted itself into a gruesome expression. "The old fool can't remember his lines. If once more I hear him say 'or words to that effect,' I shall scream and run off the stage."

In his flat a few streets from the theater, Aubrey Rock sat alone trying to succeed with an English telephone. After three wrong numbers and a couple of echoing silences, he managed to achieve a connection with his young friend and protégé, Lewis Nunford. London was only thirty miles from Prepington but the line performed as if it was stretched between planets. "I can hear you when you speak slowly," said Lewis in the manner of someone learning to read.

Rock imitated his friend's stilted delivery. "I ring you with bad news," he said. "Menacing events on the horizon out here."

"They aren't converting the theater into a bingo hall?"

"Worse. They want to get rid of me. The whole pack of them are in league. Lance Haldane keeps drawing me into ornate conversations. So far I've pretended not to understand."

"But they can't dump you, Aubrey. Why, you *are* the Prepington Rep. You were acting when the rest of them were sticking chewing gum under cinema seats."

"That's the point. They say I'm too old. But I must admit I feel as you do—I can't imagine the Rep without me."

The call ended with the aspiring young actor in London agreeing to stand by with any assistance that might be needed. Rock had only the vaguest idea of how Nunford might help him, but he felt less alone when he put down the telephone and began dressing to go first to the pub and then to the theater.

The current production was a contemporary farce with plenty of

comings and goings through various doors and the trousers of one of the actors being thrown out of a window. Aubrey Rock's part was that of the grandfather who is struck on the head and as a result confuses the identity of everyone else thereafter. The role suited Aubrey because it allowed him to do a certain amount of stumbling and fluffing of his lines. His memory *was* deteriorating in his late fifties and although he was experienced enough never to "dry"—forget his part entirely—he did have trouble getting his cues exactly right. So he tended to approximate.

He was finishing a scene alone on stage with Sybil Simon. She had been hanging on desperately, listening intently to Rock's speeches for any resemblance to the ones they had rehearsed. The trouble was, the local audience knew and loved Aubrey Rock. They watched his huge figure shambling about the stage, bald head gleaming, plump mouth drawn down in a droll pout, words exploding from him in machine-gun fashion, and they laughed.

Well, damn it, Aubrey Rock was funny. Even Sybil had to admit that. It was simply a pain working with him. And he would never change, because he thought he was doing fine.

"So I'll leave you to sort out the lot of them," Aubrey said. He was doing one of his lurching exits that always worked. "Tell them they'll have to ship up or shape out. Or words to that effect."

He was gone and Sybil was left alone on stage surrounded by his applause. She enjoyed it about as much as wading through a tide of dead fish. No question about it, no more fooling around, Lance was going to have to think of something.

Lance did. Or rather, he was quick to adopt an idea brought forward in a joking manner by Beverly Fragment, the thirty-year-old who was still able to play pretty-young-thing roles. Beverly, Sybil, and Lance were having a post-performance drink with Ken Lavender, the stage manager. They were sitting on the black wooden pews rescued from a deserted church now used as furniture in the pub around the corner.

"You saw him," Sybil was saying. "You heard him. He was shuffling around like a trained bear and talking like an auctioneer. He's crucifying me out there and I won't have it." She frowned into her mug of beer, causing the dark liquid to bubble and boil.

"They were laughing though," Lavender said. The stage manager

was a compact, carpenterish figure among these effete stage people.

"They'd laugh if he blew his nose without a handkerchief," Sybil snapped. "But I'd rather he did the play."

"I've tried to make him understand," Lance said. "But it's difficult. He's been around so long."

Beverly Fragment was writing on a scrap of paper. She sat up now and handed the paper to Lance Haldane. "Just dreaming," she said. "But wouldn't it be lovely—"

Haldane blinked at the ragged printing, then his expression cleared. "Fraggie darling," he said, "I don't know if you're joking, but this could be the answer."

"Of course I'm joking. It isn't happening, is it?"

"But we can make it happen."

"Tell everybody," Lavender suggested.

Haldane displayed the paper. "This is Beverly's little fantasy," he said and went on to read it aloud. "The Prepington Repertory Theatre announces a special gala farewell performance marking the retirement of Aubrey Rock."

"As I said, just a dream," Beverly said.

"It might work," Haldane said.

Sybil snorted. "You'd never get Aubrey to hold still for it."

"But what if we treated it as an honor and hit him with a *fait accompli*? Print up a hundred posters, arrange advertising in the paper, set up special interviews, invite the Mayor to attend." Haldane made checkmarks in beer on the tabletop. "By the time Aubrey sees what's happening, the bandwagon is rolling and can't be stopped. He'll have to smile and go along with it."

"I like it," Sybil said. "It has style."

"Not bad," Beverly Fragment said, "if I say so myself."

Only the stage manager was doubtful. He was a practical man who dealt less with dreams than he did with scenery that would fall unless properly braced and nailed. "It sounds risky," Ken Lavender said. "All kinds of room for the unexpected."

A week later, Aubrey Rock drifted backstage on the way to his dressing room and surprised Lance and Sybil and Beverly huddled around a table. They made a production of dispersing and trying to hide a large sheet of yellow paper with black lettering on it. This only aroused

Rock's curiosity, which was what was intended all along.

"Oh, dear, the surprise is ruined," Sybil said.

"What surprise?"

"Don't tell him," Beverly said. "Hide the poster." Cleverly, she thus drew Aubrey's attention to the poster in the manner of the circus clown who cries, "Don't throw the water!"

"Well," Lance said, "he has to find out eventually." And he held up the brilliant poster announcing Aubrey Rock's farewell performance at the Prepington Rep and the gala evening in his honor.

The old actor was speechless, but the others filled in with carefully rehearsed enthusiasm.

"Just think, the Mayor will be here! He'll come on stage and present you with a scroll."

"And other gifts too. I understand the merchants are getting up a fund."

"No more than you deserve, Aubrey."

Rock found his voice. "But I'm not sure—"

"Never you mind." Haldane spoke with authority. "We've printed a hundred posters. They're going up even as we speak."

The cast did such a good job of enthusing that Aubrey Rock put on his makeup and did the performance on a wave of induced euphoria. It was not until he went home and sat over a few bottles of warm stout and did some thinking that he realized they had done him. Haldane and Sybil and the rest wanted him gone and had orchestrated his departure simply by the introduction of a fanfare of cheap trumpets.

Well, if they thought Aubrey Rock was going to leave quietly he would disabuse them of that misapprehension. Fortunately, since the gala farewell was still a couple of weeks in the future, he had time to think and plan. And that is just what Aubrey Rock did. Swallowing glass after glass of murky stout, he thought. Later, lying in bed with his-Falstaff stomach awash, he planned.

The idea came to him in the morning, crisp and packaged like a laundered shirt after hours of processing in his subconscious. Rock fried himself an egg, two sausages, and a small tomato, breakfasted with his mind elsewhere, then put through a call to his friend Lewis Nunford in London. Nunford was intrigued and promised to cooperate.

In the fortnight that followed, Aubrey Rock went about his acting

with more efficiency than he had shown in years. His cues were delivered accurately and on time. His mannerisms almost vanished as he submerged his own personality in that of the character he was playing. Haldane exhibited second thoughts.

"He's so much better now. It seems a shame to unload him."

Sybil Simon was quick to hold the ship on course. "A rush of blood to the head," she said. "That's all it is. He'll be bumbling and shambling again in a month if we let him stay."

Interest in the town of Prepington was high on the day of the Aubrey Rock farewell. He was the nearest thing to a famous actor ever produced in that community. He had never made it to London's West End but he had done a few bit parts in old films that appeared occasionally on the box late at night. With a bit of luck, people said, their Aubrey might have been famous. So they bought their tickets and made their plans to fill the theater that night, never realizing that, with a bit of luck, Aubrey Rock was going to be a lot more famous than any of them ever imagined.

The play to be performed was called *The Butler's Revenge*. It was an old warhorse not seen on stage in that town for decades. But Rock had requested that it be done as his farewell performance. The part of the butler was a meaty role that gave him the freedom to pull out all the stops. The rest of the cast hated the play, but since it was Rock's last role they went along with him.

There were plenty of butterflies backstage that evening. Even though the gala was a trumped-up affair, the conspirators found themselves inspired to believe their sentiments were genuine. The tension was increased when the attempted hold-up took place.

It happened less than an hour before curtain. The cast were prowling about, drinking coffee, staring without comprehension at newspapers, enjoying that delicious sensation of impending execution which is always reprieved by the rising curtain.

The bandit let himself in by the stage door. He was a black man in his twenties, roughly dressed in leather and denim, hair an extreme Afro, eyes shaded by dark glasses. He kept his hand in his jacket pocket until he confronted the actors. Aubrey Rock included. Then he whipped out a revolver. "I tell you, mon, this is a robbery," he said. "I must ask you, don't make me nervous, mon."

The accent was perfect West Indian. Rock was very pleased with his

friend Lewis Nunford. His neat appearance and his Academy-trained voice were perfectly disguised. The cast froze and fell silent.

"One at a time," the intruder said. "Hand over your money." He approached Rock first. "I start with you, mon."

The actor moved forward casually. "Certainly. We are only poor players, you won't get much from us." Suddenly he moved with surprising speed, tangled with the young man; and, before the others knew what was happening, the gun was in Rock's hand. He forced the muzzle into the crust of the Afro. "I should blow your brains out," he said, "only I'm afraid I'd miss."

"Well done, Aubrey," Lance said. The others chorused approval.

"Hey mon, don't do this to me. I got no father. Just a mother and nine sisters and brothers back in Notting Hill. We got nothing. I can't get no job. I been on the dole for two years. I hate that, mon. I rather do anything." He went ahead with a tale of hardship delivered so convincingly that the whole group was moved. Aubrey Rock was most impressed. Given the creation of a few more good black parts on the professional stage, there was no telling how far Lewis Nunford might go.

Rock backed off. Still aiming the gun at his friend, he said, "How do the rest of you feel? I think we should let him go."

There was a babble of approval. Only Ken Lavender, the stage manager, took the practical view. "This is not the way to support the police," he said. "Letting him go won't solve his problems. He'll be off robbing somebody else later tonight."

"Oh no, mon. Hey, you let me off and I'm going straight. I learned my lesson."

"All right," Rock said. "Come on." He led the boy to the stage door, fishing in his pocket for a pound note. "I'm giving you taxi fare and I want to see you use it." They stepped through the doorway into the alley and the door banged shut behind them. Rock put the gun in his pocket. "Lewis, that was beautiful. You even convinced me."

"My pleasure, Aubrey," Nunford said, taking off the Afro wig. "Now about the gun—you'll be careful, won't you? It's real, and it's loaded."

"That's the whole point," Rock said. "Where did you get it?"

"Through a friend. In—would you believe—Notting Hill? He's one of those blokes who dream of revolution. Don't worry, it can't be traced to anybody."

"Right," the older actor said. "Now you'd better get back to Lon-

don." As his friend hurried away Rock added, "I may be joining you there soon."

The Butler's Revenge started on time and was a great success. The pre-curtain shot of adrenalin had put the performers on the bit. The audience laughed in all the right places. The Mayor's chain of office glittered in light reflected from the stage.

The climax of the play—and Aubrey Rock's reason for choosing it—happens in the final scene when the butler, who has been harshly treated by the domineering family, confronts them at last, delivers an angry speech, and then shoots them all in the sitting room.

Backstage, in a short break before the final scene, Ken Lavender approached Rock and showed him the prop gun loaded with blank cartridges ready for the mass assassination. "Where do you want this, Aubrey?"

Rock, in shirtsleeves, said, "Would you put it in my jacket pocket, Ken? In my dressing room."

Later, when it was almost time for his entrance, Rock went to the dressing room, ignored his own tuxedo jacket hanging most obviously on a hook by the mirror, and took the costume tux from where he had concealed it behind the door. He slipped into it, feeling the weight of Nunford's gun in the pocket. Glancing at the other jacket, he could see the bulk of the prop gun. Patting the lethal load at his side, he said to himself, "Thank you very much, Ken."

The audience loved the butler's final speech. Rock made the most of it as he delivered a scathing tongue-lashing to the assembled family played by Lance Haldane, Sybil Simon, and Beverly Fragment. "You ungrateful swine," he fumed. "I've served you faithfully all these years and now you try to cast me adrift. We'll see who has the last laugh. I'm quite sure you never anticipated this!"

As Rock drew the gun from his pocket, his fellow performers were blinking thoughtfully. That last bit was not in the script, was it? Never mind, the performance was over anyway.

And it was over for them, because Aubrey Rock now took careful aim and fired three deadly shots, one each into the hearts of Lance, Sybil, and Beverly.

The curtain fell to thunderous applause. The audience laughed and cheered as the curtains opened again and Rock took his farewell bow alone, the others pretending to be dead on the stage behind him.

A minute later the mood changed to hysteria. The police were summoned, and, of course, the presentations were cancelled.

It all came out at the inquest a week later. The holdup was described, the tragic mistake which saw the real gun end up in Rock's costume jacket while Lavender had put the prop gun in the pocket of its near twin—the actor's personal garment, brought along to be worn during the formal activities later. Aubrey took full blame for having let the bandit go and for retaining the weapon. He had intended to turn the gun in that night, explaining he had found it in a rubbish bin. He saw now that it was wrong to try to circumvent the law even in the smallest way and with the best of intentions. He would never do it again. All his friends dead—and on the occasion of their generous recognition of his career. He wept.

The officials were touched and lost no time in returning a verdict of accidental death in all three cases. Aubrey left the courtroom a tragic hero and announced that he would act no more. Rock's last role had been played not at Prepington Repertory Theatre as his fellow actors had intended, but in front of a coroner's court of inquiry.

Well-wishers outside pleaded with him to reconsider, to continue delighting audiences with his presence.

"No, I'm sorry," he said. "I will never set foot upon a stage again." And as he walked away, he said to himself, "And neither will those three sons of mischief"—or words to that effect.



Bentavagnia was an instrument of the law . . .

A GARDEN FULL OF SNOW

by
**T.M.
ADAMS**



That Saturday, Carmine Bentavagnia had three things he had to do. Each was routine, each would require a certain amount of time; his whole day was planned for him.

The first task was simple. It took him to a welfare hotel in the cankered belly of the city, a rickety gallery of apartments in back overlooking the parking lot. Every air conditioner in the row wheezed and dripped asthmatically in the sweltering heat, except one. Apartment 46

had had its electricity cut off. Bentavagnia began to stagger a little, working-up his act. Noting the name "Sheila Jameson" on the door of the apartment two doors down from 46, he knocked on 46's door. "Sheila?" he said loudly, with a practiced slur. "Come on, Sheila, I know you're in there!"

After two minutes of this, the door suddenly burst open. A stringy, red-face man in a T-shirt and jeans said, "Willya get outa here, she's in 44!"

"Wanna talk to Sheila," Bentavagnia blustered thickly. "Where is she?"

"Not here, jerk. Now get lost!"

"Isn't this Sheila's—" He mouthed the name on the half-open door. "Are you—what?—Frank Stanley?"

"Damn right."

Bentavagnia swayed forward. Stanley put out a hand to fend him off, and Bentavagnia deftly slipped the legal paper into it. "Then, Mr. Stanley, it's my duty to serve you with this notice of eviction."

The red-faced man stared down at the notice and began to swear. As Bentavagnia turned to leave, Stanley grabbed him by the lapel and began to shake him, shouting almost unintelligibly. He was several inches taller than Bentavagnia and in much better shape, but instead of twisting free and running for it Bentavagnia began to shout back, even louder and more furiously than Stanley himself.

Bentavagnia seemed able, like some sort of lizard, to blow himself up to twice his normal size and spit poison distilled from bile. His unenvied eminence among process servers was due to just this ability to take and dish out raw hate. It didn't matter to him whether he served papers on a cheating wife or a starving squatter, on a crooked politician or an insurance-swindler's mark. He didn't care how underhandedly he approached them—whether he played delivery boy or accident victim or fireman, whether he crashed their parties or scaled their fire-escapes or blockaded their driveways. He made no allowances. His essential gift was a self-righteousness that encompassed all possible cases. He was an instrument of the law, wasn't he? And these evaders of the law, who had offered him violence time and again, were the scum of the earth. And he told them so to their faces, at the top of his lungs, just as now, bringing all of Stanley's neighbors out to listen and reducing Stanley to white-faced impotence. Bentavagnia loved to see the satis-

faction on the neighbors' faces whenever he evicted anyone; it reaffirmed his faith in human nature. He strolled off, whistling.

This first routine task of the day left him in a relatively good mood to approach the second, a visit with his kids. As he walked back to his car, he felt almost mellow. He had vented only a small portion of his vast reservoir of anger, but the experience, which would have raised another man's blood pressure, had seemed to lower his. The old hypertension was still there, however, like an extra shirt in the summer heat. He was going to sweat right through to his jacket soon. This bothered him; he spent a great deal of money on his cheap-looking suits. They were in that style, originated by Las Vegas nightclub performers and metastasizing throughout the country via singles bars and discos, which bids fair to become the national costume, and the barrel-shaped Bentavagnia, with his sallow snapping-turtle face, brought out their every flaw. Only his tiny black custom-made shoes had class, and he had to pay twice what they were worth for that, the fitters had come to hate him so.

He had money, though, despite alimony and child support to pay. True, even a large city requires only a small number of full-time process servers, since junior law clerks can handle most of the court-issued citations, summonses, and subpoenas. But lawyers will take good care of the man who can tackle the determined evaders, even to the extent of filling in his slack time with their own routine evictions, foreclosures, and garnishments. Bentavagnia was making out all right—or so he told himself, glaring at total strangers on the street.

He visited his sons every Saturday at the same time. Myra, his ex, would leave the room while he showed them what he'd brought them. His presents were always expensive since he could find fault with anything not hidden behind a big price tag. Today he gave Tony, aged seven, and Jerry, six, each a book of rhymes and stories. The books were "personalized." Throughout the text the name of a recurring character, the brave mouse, had been left blank and these spaces had been filled in with Tony's and Jerry's names in the same typeface, only spelled backward, to give them a fantasy look and make the gimmick more interesting.

Tony and Jerry received the presents without enthusiasm. Ordinarily

active, vicious, cheerful kids, in their father's presence they were sullen, obedient, and fretful. He had them open their books, got them to turn to the same page with a minimum of shouting, and knelt down to show them where they could find their names.

"See here, where the mouse is in the garden, next to this snowbank? No, Jerry, look at your own book, it's the same—see, right under the picture, the mouse's name?"

"Ynot," Tony said.

"That right, that's 'Tony,' see, spelled backwards. And Jerry's says 'Yrrej.'"

"Stupid idiots put it in backwards," Tony said.

"No, no, it's *supposed* to be like that!" Bentavagnia said. "It's *cute*."

"Yeah, but too bad those stupid idiots hadda put my name in wrong," Tony said.

"It's *supposed*—"

"You gonna send them back, Daddy?" Jerry asked.

When Myra came in a moment later, the kids were in tears and Bentavagnia was in one of his rages. She called for her new boy friend, a truck driver, who grabbed the process server by his belt and collar and drop-kicked him into the street. Bentavagnia soon returned, a tower of righteous indignation. After giving everyone on the block a lecture on a father's rights he went back to his car and drove off. From beginning to end the interview had been familiar and routine, the natural result of attempting good will in bad faith, a Bentavagnia specialty. It was now noon.

The third task of the day Bentavagnia had also done a thousand times before. He was to serve a man named Freddy Angel with a summons to testify in a suit arising from a traffic accident. It was a nuisance summons, but probably one that Angel wouldn't strain to avoid. The only snags were that Angel was hard to get hold of and, worse, he was reputed to be a bagman for the Machine—and Bentavagnia wanted nothing to do with that outfit. He had even thought to ask Dominic about it the night before.

Dominic was his mentor and his only friend. A tall, white-haired man with a face from an old Roman coin, he was the proprietor of the Venetian Gondolier Cocktail Lounge. In exchange for Bentavagnia's constant fawning, Dominic supplied him with liquor on credit, a sym-

pathetic ear for his teary midnight maunderings, and occasional advice. Dominic's influence over the process server even impelled Bentavagnia to attend Mass with Dom's family occasionally; Bentavagnia had otherwise stopped pretending to have faith years before, when his mother had died. Dominic's opinion about the Angel commission had been reassuring.

"This is a small thing, you tell me," he had said, "and not related to his business. This is all right, if it is done properly. Introduce yourself straightforwardly. Give him the paper with an apology. If he takes it badly, offer to forget about it. Keep it quiet, and with respect." It sounded reasonable.

Locating the target had been a problem. For tax purposes, they said, Angel maintained no legal residence in the city, although he was always around. Fortunately, the lawyer who had commissioned Bentavagnia had a reporter friend who had made Angel his special study. The reporter said that Angel always showed up on Saturday afternoons at the Department of Public Works building, in the office of his wife's uncle, where he received instructions about cash pickups and other things Bentavagnia didn't need or want to know about. Bentavagnia had promised the reporter he wouldn't reveal his knowledge of Angel's pattern by making his move in the Public Works building itself, but would wait and follow him a little distance away.

By two o'clock Bentavagnia knew that the promise had been a mistake. The way Angel was mixing up his trail, he was evidently on one of his errands, and it was all Bentavagnia could do to keep from losing him in the savage midday traffic. When his target suddenly pulled over and parked illegally, Bentavagnia had to cruise past him a full block before he could do the same.

It was easier to follow a man on foot, of course, unless he started to run. Bentavagnia picked Angel out of the crowd and slowly began to narrow the block between them. No, Bentavagnia thought, sweating beneath the dirty city sun, we don't want to run. Angel had something of Bentavagnia's short, tubby build, which was encouraging, but he was a few years younger and more fit. Besides, this had to be done quietly and with respect.

Within a few minutes, however, Bentavagnia was once again regretting a good resolution. Angel kept taking fast, wide-scanning looks behind him, forcing Bentavagnia to keep to a casual pace. At this rate he

would never catch up, and already Angel had crossed one of the invisible lines that bounded off the worst fringe of the city, an area Bentavagnia didn't even like to drive through. Not that it was unfamiliar territory, exactly, with its burned-out buildings, the squatters hiding from view, and the wolfish kid-packs. Bentavagnia had been there before—in Italy in 1944 and in a dozen nightmares since. The hell with it, he thought, and began to stride more purposefully, heedless of how conspicuous this made him in the increasingly empty streets.

He was gaining on him when suddenly Angel began to run. Swearing, Bentavagnia followed suit. He was twenty paces behind his target when Angel ducked around the corner. It took less than five seconds for Bentavagnia to reach the spot and have a clear field of view. Only about three seconds, surely, no more than four. But Angel was gone.

Both the street Bentavagnia had come from and the street he faced were empty for blocks. There were no parked cars, not even much litter—just the water-sheen indicating that a street-cleaning vehicle had recently passed through and, over to one side, some tarpaulins and a MEN WORKING barricade, as though someone had been doing road or sewer repair work earlier in the day. He walked over to check, half-heartedly. Angel hadn't had the time to cross the street, lift the tarp, and crawl under it—he'd only had a few seconds. There was no one under the tarp, no trench to hide in—no rational explanation at all.

The buildings at this end of the street were all condemned, their doors boarded up. Even the alleyway entries farther along were blocked off. Angel couldn't have gone fifty feet from the corner—had he done so, he could have found no place to hide—yet Bentavagnia drifted down the block, impelled, despite the desire to stay near the last place he'd seen Angel, by the frantic feeling that he had to hurry, that Angel was getting away.

Hadn't there been a sound, a sort of chime, a signal at the moment he'd entered this strangely empty world? Or had that been only the old hypertension, a ringing in the ears?

He was coming to the end of the block. He'd had enough. It was time to leave the place to the arsonists and wreckers. There were still a few storefronts with FOR RENT signs in the windows, but they would never be rented again. Dead end on a through street, Bentavagnia thought.

But what was this? The last storefront on the block looked almost

clean. There was a poster in the window: the words TALBOT FOR MAYOR surmounted by a larger-than-life photograph of a prissy, schoolmasterish face. Syndicalist Fusion Party? There was no such group in the city, not on the ballot anyway. And wasn't it kind of early to campaign for mayor? Yet what little of the shop he could see past the edges of the poster looked kept up, swept out, new.

The storefront door opened. A tall, swarthy man looked at Bentavagnia balefully. "You looking for something around here, buddy?" he asked.

Bentavagnia snatched at the chance. "Freddy Angel?" he said.

"Yeah, O.K., Mr. Angel," the man said, stepping aside. "We know what *you're* here for." And Bentavagnia stepped in out of the sunlight.

A second guard was sitting in the front room, a shotgun across his knees, peering around the edges of the poster at the bright slivers of street. "Is it him?" he asked.

"Yeah," said the first. "Tell the Judge Freddy Angel's here. Right this way, Freddy. We gotta hurry. Your money's waiting for you."

They went down a narrow corridor and the swarthy man motioned for Bentavagnia to enter a small dark room at the end of it. The only furniture was a short wooden chair, the only light a flyblown green-glass globe on the ceiling. Bentavagnia sat in the jungly dimness, scared and exhilarated.

The moment the man at the door had mistaken him for Freddy Angel, he should have spoken up—he knew that. But it had seemed the easiest way to collar Angel, to wait at the place where he was expected. He could see himself blustering it out—"Hey, hold on a minute, buddy, *I* never said I was Freddy Angel!"—and then, they'd mentioned money.

Freddy Angel was a bagman for the Machine. He went to expensive nightclubs, expensive hotels; and every now and then to not-so-expensive places where people gave him briefcases full of fifty-dollar bills, which he took to other places, quickly, secretly, with no one following him. Bentavagnia's pulse hammered at the thought of that money being handed over to him, no questions asked. The Machine's money, sure, and that was scary—but they would never know who had taken it, and in hours he could be farther away than they would ever look.

Why not? What would he be leaving behind? The city he'd been

born in, his children, the only job he'd ever succeeded at—everything, in short, that blighted his days and poisoned his nights. He was going to do it. He was going to be Freddy Angel and take the money. The only uncertainty lay in the dreamlikeness of it all. As though he'd walked *through* Angel, into his shoes.

"Well, and if it isn't himself," said a stage-Irish voice at the door. This had to be the man they'd called the Judge, Bentavagnia decided—a tall, paunchy man with a florid face and grey-streaked red hair. He smelled drunk; his expensive, conservative suit looked slightly disarrayed. "Freddy Angel, come to collect a widow's mite from his long-suffering friends in Detroit."

Bentavagnia smiled uneasily. "You know, I don't got much time for this," he said, "so if you'll just hand over the money—"

"Ah, sure and you can spare me a moment, Mister Freddy," the Judge said. The two guards had entered behind him, and Bentavagnia didn't like to be sitting down while the three of them stood. His system had reacted badly to the change in temperature too, and the mustiness of the air. But when one of the underlings handed the Judge a slim briefcase, Bentavagnia's spirits picked up. "You see, I've a message of sorts for your wife's uncle. In an organization such as ours, it's sometimes necessary to take the time for these little discussions, isn't that right?"

Bentavagnia nodded quickly. "Uh, quietly, and with respect," he said inanely.

The Judge gave him a puzzled but delighted smile. "Just so. Sometimes it's necessary to have a quiet, respectful chat to reestablish trust wherever it has . . . broken down. You follow?"

Bentavagnia made a noncommittal noise.

"Well, that's the reason as brings me here," said the Judge. "An outsider's viewpoint, d'you see? And our little campaign headquarters should make for the necessary privacy, a lot less suspicious than an empty building, what with all these goings in and out. So let me take my time.

"Now it's trust we're talking about. Trust, Freddy m'lad, is a matter of deeds, not words. Many a man may talk loyal, but it's acting loyal that counts. We all remember how persuasively you protested your own loyalty last May, as a for-instance, when one of your, ah, *deliveries* failed to reach Congressman Peavey. And we believed you, Freddy.

We believed that some wino got lucky and picked that package out of the alley before Peavey's boys got to it. We trusted your word, y'see."

On and on he went, his musical voice reminding Bentavagnia of chimes.

What about chimes? . . . He'd gone around the corner, and he'd thought he'd heard a sort of chiming. Or was it a ringing? He couldn't recall it any more. Had it been as loud as cymbals clashing, as soft as rosary beads clicking? He couldn't tell, the memory was gone, subsumed in the Judge's voice.

These Irish sure loved to talk. Bentavagnia thought of the old-time Irish lawyers who had still been around at the end of the war, packing them into the courthouses where Bentavagnia looked for work. That accent had been everything to them, although even then they'd probably been faking it, two or three generations removed from Cork or Killarney. They'd been colorful but stagey, with their crocodile tears and maudlin summations, their quotes from folk songs or Scripture. Judge or not, Bentavagnia thought, he wouldn't be able to get away with that kind of garbage in court nowadays.

"But as it happened, we didn't trust Congressman Peavey. We had marked his money so as to be able to threaten to show where it came from some day if need be. It could come in handy, we thought. And it did, it did.

"A few months ago, we were in the bidding for a piece of property in Atlantic City. A very big deal it was. But we lost the bid, and the fellow who won paid cash down, quite a lot of it. I won't bore you with details—we know you're in a hurry—but we prevailed upon a local official to give us a look at that money, and lo and behold, some of it was from that bundle meant for Congressman Peavey. Now we began to ask ourselves who was the source of this money, who stood behind the front man? Not some wino, you could bet. Perhaps the Congressman himself. Perhaps he'd lied and *had* received his cash. We had to check."

These were secrets Bentavagnia didn't want to know. But maybe if he didn't interrupt, the old man would finish faster. Bentavagnia had to be back on the street before the real Angel arrived. But arrived from where? Bentavagnia squirmed in his seat, looking attentive, trying not to listen.

He knew whom the Judge reminded him of. Father Boyle, when

Bentavagnia was six years old, at war with the Church and unrepentant. Father Boyle praying over him in his wonderful liquid voice, and little Carmine moving his lips in time and muttering rebelliously, too low to be heard, "Row row row your boat, gently down the stream." And Father Boyle had said . . .

"Your own wife's uncle, lad. Your own wife's uncle. Now how could he have known where that money was without your telling him? Or giving it to him?"

"You should pay more attention," Father Boyle had said sadly.

"Well, uh," Bentavagnia said, realizing that despite the Judge's smiling geniality, this was his last chance to speak. "Look, let me straighten you guys out. You seem to think I'm Freddy Angel or somebody—all I said was, I'm *looking* for Freddy Angel, see? I mean, here's my identification—"

The Judge slapped Bentavagnia's proffered wallet out of his hand and motioned to his underlings. Without seeming to move quickly, they were to either side of Bentavagnia, holding his arms fast. "Freddy, Freddy, we know how conscientiously you cover your trail when you're on a job. We know all about your phony IDs," the Judge said, going through Bentavagnia's pockets, pulling out car keys and pocket comb and tossing them on the floor. He pulled a paper from Bentavagnia's jacket pocket, glanced at it, then held it before Bentavagnia's face. "But if you *aren't* Freddy Angel, can you explain why you've been served with a summons in Freddy's name?"

"Who do you think you—" Bentavagnia began, but his tirade was lost in the opening thunder of the Judge's own.

"You thieving scut! You miserable shabby little dribbet of a no-good! Pledge your faith, then steal! Come 'round for more, then deny your own name! 'You got the wrong man, Your Honor,' 'I wasn't there, Your Honor,' 'He just asked me to hold the bag for him and ran off, Your Honor.' What do you take me for, a fool?" His guards released him, and Bentavagnia sank into the chair, numbed by the Judge's words.

Now the Judge lifted the briefcase from the floor and opened it out flat in the air. Inside it, neatly strapped in place against a red-velvet lining, were two silenced pistols and a cassette tape-recorder, its spools turning. The two guards had returned to the Judge's side. Each took a pistol from the case, their faces reflecting disdain for these ritual theatrics. The Judge was enjoying himself, however, talking into the tape

recorder in a stage whisper, cradling the opened briefcase in front of him like an ornate Bible.

"To sum up," he whispered, then inhaled and began again, louder. "To sum up, the defendant does not deny that he has embezzled Machine funds and used them against the Machine. The defendant has offered no explanation, but has instead attempted, by the most piddling and pathetic means, to escape his just deserts."

It wasn't happening. He couldn't have walked into a felon's shoes. It was just a dream, a fantasy timed to the melody rising and falling in the Judge's voice. He could feel the end of it coming, the crescendo before the final cymbal clash.

"As I stand here," the Judge continued, "looking at this little man of loyal words and traitorous deeds, I am reminded of a nursery rhyme my own sainted mother taught me some fifty-odd years ago.

" 'A man of words and not of deeds

Is like a garden full of weeds;

And when the weeds begin to grow,

It's like a garden-full of snow . . . ' "

The guards exchanged sardonic looks. The tape-recorder whirled on.

" 'And when the snow is here no more,

It's like a lion at the door;

And when the door begins to crack,

It's like a stick upon your back . . . ' "

Bentavagnia wasn't listening to the dream-summation, not meant for him, anyway. He was listening to something within himself, a chiming in the ears maddeningly out of sync with the pounding of his heart. The Judge put his briefcase down, grabbed Bentavagnia by the lapels, and pulled him to his feet. He shook Bentavagnia rhythmically as he chanted, as if to get a rise out of him.

" 'And when your back begins to smart,

It's like a penknife in your heart;

And when your heart begins to bleed,

You're dead, and dead, and dead, indeed! ' "

Bentavagnia could see nothing but the Judge's eyes—they were waiting for some word—and he felt his heart stop—quite distinctly—and he tried to stammer out a last Hail Mary. "Gently down the stream," he whispered. No, that was wrong, it was "Hail Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily . . . "

The Judge dropped him back in his chair disgustedly. The guards raised their unneeded guns.

Life is but a dream.

A few minutes later three men stood on the curb of that desolate street. The tallest was whistling a child's song. His younger companions, as tough-looking as they were, seemed somewhat shaken. A limousine came for them, and the street was empty again.

Later that afternoon, there were a number of people clustered around the intersection at which Freddy Angel had disappeared, superintended by a young cop, whose squad car was detailed there. Two ambulances were parked next to him, one equipped with a winch and a miniature crane for traffic accidents. The ambulance medics were beginning to show the effects of many beers; after working for an hour in the intense heat one of them had gone to a deli for several cold eight-packs. There was no traffic, but a small noisy crowd had gathered, mostly children.

The focus of all the attention was a manhole, from which the medics were attempting to remove a heavy-set man, the chief obstacles to his removal being the splints on both his legs and one arm. A makeshift harness had been strapped around him, and now the crane could be employed. One of the medics from the second ambulance was telling the policeman that all of this waste of time and effort was due to the incredible incompetence of the guys in the first ambulance.

"Look, I'm still trying to figure out how to make out my report," the cop said, interrupting him. "You say this guy was carrying several IDs but answers to the name of Federico Angeli, and the reason he wasn't looking where he was going—"

"Here, the way I see it is this," the medic said. "These guys who were down there working on the sewers broke for lunch, and you know what that means—for the day. Later somebody must have moved their barricades to the curb to clear the way, probably whoever was running the street-cleaning machine that came through this morning. Whoever it was didn't notice that the manhole cover wasn't on securely. Then I guess when the street-cleaning machine *did* go over, it dragged the cover nearly all the way off—and the whole trouble was, this is one of the old-style flat covers like you don't see much any more.

"O.K., the stage is set. This guy Angeli is walking along. According to him, he gets the idea somebody is following him and he starts to run. He turns the corner and starts across the street, looking backward all the time to see if he's being tailed, and drops right into the manhole. On the way down his chin catches that little edge of the cover that's still hanging over the hole. Whap! The manhole cover levers over his head and plunks neatly into place. Ching! So the guy's out cold, a couple of teeth missing, legs broken, arm broken—and no way for anybody to know where he went unless they were watching the exact second it happened. Poof! Like a magic trick."

"Poof," the cop said, nodding ponderously. "So how long was he unconscious?"

"Dropped around two o'clock, he says. Woke up and started screaming about four."

The policeman ambled over to the manhole from which Freddy Angel's face was now emerging. "What was he kvetching about down there?" he asked the medic.

"He says he has an appointment. All the time we're working on him, besides screaming, he's saying he's got this important appointment."


Angel, seeing the cop, nodded his head and spoke, attempting to enunciate clearly despite a sore and swollen jaw. "Important. Lot of money. Business. Had to get there on time. Everything ruined now."

The cop looked grave and wise from the beer he had cadged from the medics. His voice had a ring to it, as though fraught with meaning. "Buddy," he said solemnly, "this just wasn't your day."



It was another of the Professor's clever ideas . . .

The HUMMELMEYER OPERATION



by
**JAMES
HOLDING**

Even the near-Stygian gloom of the Elite Cocktail Lounge was unable to hide from me the smile of approbation that bloomed on Dixie's lovely face across the table from me.

In a conspiratorial whisper she said, "I bet you have another of your clever ideas, haven't you? Is that why you asked me to meet you here, Professor?"

Dixie addresses me as "Professor" because I once attended

Dartmouth College for a year and speak, in consequence, with what Dixie is pleased to characterize as the precision of a pedant.

I nodded. "Another idea, yes. And this time I believe we may achieve excellent results, Dixie, if you are willing to undertake a simple masquerade for a few days."

"A masquerade! How exciting!" Dixie's clear, brown, childishy candid gaze reflected the enthusiasm of the true con artist at the prospect of action. "What kind of a masquerade, Professor?"

"The impersonation of a mentally disturbed woman."

"You want me to pretend to be crazy?" Dixie's enthusiasm cooled perceptibly.

"No, no, child, not crazy," I soothed her. "Merely afflicted with a very common malady known as kleptomania."

"Oh, well, that's different," Dixie said, relieved. "Kleptomania's just stealing, isn't it? I can do that." She settled back to listen.

I got the telephone call the next afternoon about three. I'd been waiting for it.

"Yes?" I said, adopting a humorless, no-nonsense tone.

"Mr. Miller?" a voice asked me. "Mr. C. B. Miller?" A bass voice, tinged, I thought, with the orotundity of authority.

"Right," I replied.

"My name's Damson, Mr. Miller. Chief of Security at Hummel-meyer's Department Store."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Damson?" Hummelmeyer's is the biggest department store in the city.

"I have a woman here who claims to be your wife, Mr. Miller. One of my men has apprehended her in the act of shoplifting."

"What!" I put pain and indignation into my voice. "Not again! Poor Estelle." I paused and asked hopefully, "You're sure she's my wife?"

"She has no identification with her, but she gave me your number to call. She's right here in my office. Five feet six, shoulder-length red-dish blonde hair, woven straw shoulder bag, green pantsuit, nice figure, big sunglasses over baby blue eyes, and cries easy. Does that sound like your wife?"

It sounded like Dixie with her blonde wig, blue contact lenses, and platform shoes on. "That's Estelle," I sighed. "What did she steal, Mr. Damson?"

"An Italian silk head scarf. Sneaked it into her purse and left the store with it. My men braced her outside, retrieved the scarf, and brought her to me. The scarf's a ten-fifty item, Mr. Miller. She's offered to pay cash for it, of course, but it's against Hummelmeyer's policy to allow thieves to pay their way out of trouble. So now she's into the remorseful tears bit, and begs you to come and rescue her. 'Rescue' is her word, not mine." Damson's voice was sardonic.

"Listen, Mr. Damson," I said seriously, "I appreciate your calling me more than I can tell you. Our psychiatrist in Texas discharged Estelle several years ago as cured. But apparently he was wrong."

Mr. Damson sighed wearily into the telephone. "Is your wife a kleptomaniac, Mr. Miller? Is that what you mean?"

"I'm afraid so. Quite innocent and honest usually. But occasionally she *has* stolen things. Small items mostly, like that scarf. She knows perfectly well that I can afford to pay for anything that catches her fancy—*anything*—yet that doesn't help her when one of these spells hits her. She literally can't keep herself from stealing. That's why I don't permit her to carry credit cards with her, only cash. Unless I'm with her, of course."

"I don't get it," said Mr. Damson.

"What would Hummelmeyer's do if you caught one of your charge customers stealing?"

"Cancel out her account on the spot."

"You see? With Estelle in one of her light-fingered moods, we'd soon be up to our knees in canceled credit cards and charge accounts."

"Do I understand that she *has* a charge account at Hummelmeyer's?"

"I have, Mr. Damson. C. B. Miller, 1020 Cedarhurst Drive, charge card number 3616690-41-1. If you feed it into your computer, you'll find my credit is excellent, Mr. Damson. Meanwhile, if you'll be kind enough to keep Mrs. Miller there in your office, I'll be there in twenty minutes or so to take her off your hands."

I whistled one of Scott Joplin's tunes from *The Sting* as I drove my station wagon downtown toward Hummelmeyer's Department Store to "rescue" Dixie from the clutches of Mr. Damson. I felt confident, optimistic. Now that the first hurdle had been successfully surmounted, what could possibly go wrong? Yet I realized that my euphoric mood was premature, to say the least. It was still too early in the operation

to predict success with any certainty—and already too late for Dixie and me to escape unscathed if anything went wrong. Still, I couldn't avoid the conviction that this time everything would fall into place smoothly and inevitably. Fortune couldn't turn her back on me now.

Not after my incredible luck in finding C. B. Miller's wallet in the YMCA locker room.

I'd come out of the shower and was toweling myself off after my game of handball, when I spotted the black-leather wallet lying under one of the dressing benches in the aisle next to mine. I could hear voices reverberating in the adjacent swimming pool. For the moment, however, I was alone in the locker room.

My first impulse was purely larcenous, of course. I counted the cash in the wallet's money pocket and found it to come to the pleasant sum of one hundred and twenty-one dollars. A small bonanza. Then I rapidly investigated the rest of the wallet's contents: credit cards for five major oil companies, Master Charge, Visa, Carte Blanche, Diner's Club, American Express—all issued in the name of C. B. Miller of 1020 Cedarhurst Drive in one of our fashionable suburbs; registration certificates for a Lincoln Continental and a Cadillac Seville; a driver's license, tucked in behind an Avis credit card; membership cards for the University Club and one of the district's exclusive country clubs; plastic charge-account plates for a number of local stores; a dog-eared business card identifying C. B. Miller as the president of something called The Superior Drilling Supply Company of Texas; a wallet-size color snapshot of a fiftyish woman and two teenaged boys standing beside a private swimming pool, with a hand-written caption on the back, "Estelle and Dick and Jimmy, taken the day I retired, Dallas, 1975."

Not the sort of stuff you'd expect to find in your ordinary YMCA member's wallet.

Briefly I contemplated appropriating wallet, credit cards, cash, and all. Then I realized how useless that would be. The moment C. B. Miller found his wallet missing, every credit card he owned would be invalidated within twenty-four hours after he reported the loss to the Hot-Line Protection Service whose sticker adorned each card in his wallet. I wouldn't be able to use any of them safely.

So in the end I replaced everything, including the cash, in Mr. Miller's wallet except for two items; his driver's license, which in our state

does not carry the driver's photograph, and the charge card for Hummelmeyer's Department Store. These two items, I concluded after consideration, would probably not be missed for a few days after Mr. Miller recovered his wallet.

Which he would undoubtedly do. For although I did not know C. B. Miller, never having encountered him to my knowledge at the Y or anywhere else, he must, I reasoned, own one of the voices I heard echoing in the swimming pool. I therefore replaced his wallet exactly where I had found it under the bench, dressed hurriedly, and left, asking myself why Mr. Miller would be disporting himself in a humble YMCA swimming pool instead of in the pool of his exclusive country club. I needn't have worried. I found out later that he was a member of the Y's local board.

When I returned to my car in Hummelmeyer's parking lot after being closeted for twenty minutes with Mr. Damson, Hummelmeyer's security chief, and a Mr. Conrad, the store's credit manager, I found Dixie demurely awaiting me in the front seat of my station wagon.

"Well, Professor," she asked me at once, "did you sell them?"

I had sent her down to the car to wait for me, being reluctant, I explained to Damson and Conrad, to discuss her disorder with strangers in her presence, as she was very sensitive about it.

"Sensitive is right," Damson had agreed, watching a piteously weeping Dixie, a.k.a. Estelle Miller, depart from his office under convoy of the young security officer who had detected Dixie in the act of shoplifting—a fellow who was introduced to me by Damson as Harry Something-or-other.

Harry looked like anything but a man whose aim in life was to reduce Hummelmeyer's pilferage losses: six feet of spare muscular body, black hair cut long enough to cover his ears, a quiet, respectful demeanor, and very alert brown eyes. In faded jeans and sloppy T-shirt, he looked more like a college kid or a hippie on his way to a commune. Even I, with my vast experience, would never have suspected he was a store detective.

"Of course I sold them," I told Dixie, not without pride, climbing behind the wheel of the station wagon and starting the motor.

"Goody," she said, all smiles. "Tell me about it."

"With pleasure," I said. "Your superb performance as the troubled

kleptomaniac was almost enough in itself to convince Hummelmeyer's of our good faith. Miller's driver's license established our identity, of course. And our charge record at the store established us as free-spending charge customers, as I had hoped. Miller's original application for a charge account at Hummelmeyer's didn't hurt either. By the time I got there they'd looked it up. Very impressive credentials. The Millers have accounts at the right banks, previous charge accounts at Neiman-Marcus, and so on. And of course I made out a splendid case history for you, Dixie. I told them that your psychiatrist in Texas had advised me privately that a series of public humiliations as a kleptomaniac would certainly exacerbate your condition—that the best therapy for you would be to pretend that you were doing no shoplifting at all, even when engaged in the act. I explained that you hadn't had a spell of this disorder for two or three years now, ever since we moved north from Texas. After I dropped a few hints as to my club memberships and my recent contribution to the local library building fund, Damson and Conrad were totally in agreement with my proposal."

"Which was what, exactly?" Dixie asked.

I drove carefully past a traffic policeman who wore spotless white gloves and a supercilious smile. "That you be allowed to work out your own salvation," I said. "That I would personally be responsible for anything you stole from Hummelmeyer's. That I am financially well able and willing to cover the cost of anything you might absentmindedly remove from their store without paying for it. And that they therefore should give you permission to lift anything you fancied—as an aid to your complete recovery—and merely put it on my tab. That is," I amended, "on the tab of Mr. C. B. Miller. And I would gladly and thankfully pay it."

"So," Dixie said cheerfully, "I can steal anything I like from Hummelmeyer's?"

"Anything. Up to and including the most expensive items, I should guess. That young man Harry who first picked you up today for shoplifting will be briefed to watch for you, follow you around while you're in the store, and put the price of anything you steal on Mr. C. B. Miller's bill. Isn't that splendid?"

"Couldn't be better," said Dixie warmly. "I'll have a ball."

And have a ball she did. Knowing her predilection for the best and

the costliest, I gave her no specific instructions, leaving it to her to select the items she purloined from Hummelmeyer's in her role of Mrs. C. B. Miller, wealthy kleptomaniac.

My contribution to the operation at this point was the fencing, through channels long familiar to me, of the merchandise Dixie stole. Even at a third to a half of true market value, the cash sum thus accumulated in only a few days was quite impressive.

On the fifth day of our operation, a Friday, Dixie turned up at my apartment after dark with half a dozen Steuben old-fashioned glasses and an opera-length string of matched cultured pearls as her loot of the day. I congratulated her on her good taste, gave her an honest accounting of our profits thus far, and then warned her, "Hummelmeyer's send out their monthly statements to charge customers on Monday, so I'm afraid we'll have to finish up tomorrow. C. B. Miller's sharp cries of anguish when he receives his bill this month will no doubt make the welkin ring merrily—as well as the ears of Mr. Conrad, Hummelmeyer's credit manager. You and I must have disappeared by then, of course."

Dixie nodded.

"I suggest that we would be wise to take a short leave of absence from the city until things quiet down a bit," I said. "A vacation, you might call it. Not necessarily together, Dixie." There is nothing physical between Dixie and me. "But a vacation out of the city."

"O.K., Professor," said Dixie. "Tomorrow's the end of the operation if you say so. I'll try to make it a red-letter day."

She was as good as her word. I couldn't believe my eyes when she strolled into my apartment the following evening about six o'clock. For although it was a very warm day in August, Dixie was carrying a heavy fur coat over her arm.

"What in the world is that?" I inquired, gesturing at it.

"What does it look like?" She dumped the coat on my sofa. "It's a fur coat, Professor, as any fool can plainly see. I took it right off the display mannequin in Hummelmeyer's fur salon, where it was being featured in the August fur sale."

"It doesn't look like much," I said. "It's neither mink nor sable, with that long hair. Couldn't you have selected something less bulky and more valuable?"

Dixie gave me her gamine grin.

"Look at the price tag," she said.

I looked at it. "Well, well, I apologize, Dixie. Twenty-four thousand dollars! What is it?"

"Russian lynx. Very new, very smart, very fenceable," said Dixie, dimpling. "Is there such a word, Professor? Fenceable? Anyway." She groped in her shoulder bag. "That's not all. Take a gander at this, if you want to see something pretty."

She held out on the palm of one hand a circlet of platinum paved with diamonds and a pair of emerald-and-diamond earrings. Their price tags read, respectively, thirty-five hundred dollars and twenty-three hundred dollars.

"A red-letter day indeed, Dixie," I complimented her. "I can't tell you—"

"Wait." Dixie interrupted me. Her face turned sober and her dimples disappeared. "That's the good news, Professor," she said. "The rest is all bad."

"Bad?" I asked, startled.

She nodded.

"What is it?"

"Just that we're blown, Professor. Wide open. I'm sorry."

For an instant I seemed to be struck dumb. At length I managed to whisper, "What do you mean, Dixie?"

"That store detective, Harry. Remember him? The one who caught me shoplifting the first day and has been following me around the store ever since?"

It was my turn to nod.

"Well, he knows I'm not Mrs. C. B. Miller."

"What! How could he know that?"

"Because Mrs. C. B. Miller is his aunt," Dixie said. "And he knows I ain't her."

I tried to absorb this calmly, but it was a telling blow. "Harry told you this?"

"Yes."

"He may be lying."

"I don't think so. He knows more about the Millers than we do. A lot of stuff he couldn't have made up—" she eyed me "—or found in a wallet. Like the prep schools his cousins go to. Like how much Hum-

melmeyer's charged Miller for redecorating his new house on Cedarhurst Drive. Like that Mr. Miller's brother Hubert has been running The Superior Drilling Supply Company since C.B.'s retirement. Oh, he's telling the truth, all right. I know it."

"Perhaps." I tried to smile. "But it seems very quixotic of Harry, in that case, to permit our shoplifting spree to continue unchecked for a week without blowing the whistle on us."

Dixie said, "I asked him about that. The truth is, Harry can't stand his aunt. He says she's a snob and a bitch and a bird-brain. And he dislikes her husband, C.B., even more. Harry's from the poor side of the family, I gather. Anyway, he couldn't care less how we sandbag Hummelmeyer's and the Millers."

I was still puzzled. "Then why reveal all this to you, Dixie?"

"He wants half our loot," Dixie said. "That's the bad news, Professor."

Bad news indeed. Yet not total defeat. I said, "Even half our profits on this operation is still respectable. Half a loaf is better than none. Yet why shouldn't we have the whole loaf? We need not take Harry's blackmail demand lying down. We can be on a plane for Timbuktu or some other safe retreat in no time, Dixie. I can stop on our way to the airport to turn this fur coat and jewelry into cash." I began planning rapidly. "I'll shave off my moustache, wear a toupee, and put pads in my cheeks. You burn your wig and take out your blue contacts, get rid of those platform shoes and—"

Dixie shook her head. "No good, Professor. Harry's waiting downstairs in the lobby for me right this minute. He's given us fifteen minutes to make our decision before he goes to the fuzz."

I looked at my watch. "We've still got time to leave through the back door of the furnace room and make the airport, Dixie—" I broke off. "How does he happen to be sitting downstairs in the lobby, for God's sake?"

"He followed me here from Hummelmeyer's and parked right behind me in your parking lot. That's where we had our little talk. In your parking lot. I'm still dazed." Dixie gave me an up-from-under look. "I haven't told you about his other demand yet."

"His other demand?" I sighed.

"He wants me to go out to dinner with him tonight," Dixie said.

"To dinner? What on earth for?"

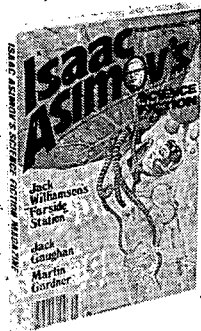
"He thinks I'm kind of cute." Dixie blushed.

I was beyond surprise. I stared at her, this Dixie who wasn't Dixie, with the wrong color hair, the wrong color eyes, the wrong height. I tried to see her as Harry must see her. I said sternly, "You're not going to dinner with this—this—*blackmailer*, are you?"

Dixie fluffed her blonde wig. "Why not?" she said. "I think *he's* kind of cute too."



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The message read, "You will die for the Arena . . ."

Death in Egypt by HENRY J. PARRY



Which one? Beasley asked himself. Which one thinks he is going to knock me off?

He looked at the tour members gathered in the riverboat's lounge, where they sat talking and drinking like old friends although they had met only the week before. Reaching for the peanuts, he flicked them expertly one by one into his mouth, displaying the blue shield entwined by a snake that was tattooed on his forearm. As he chewed, he

DEATH IN EGYPT

97

smiled in secret amusement at his answer to the nosey types who had tried to find out from him more than he wished to tell them about himself. "I ain't of no interest to anyone," he had insisted, with an aw-shucks, rough-diamond honesty, adding to himself, Except the Internal Revenue Service.

A cruise up the Nile River was not his idea of a vacation—Las Vegas or Acapulco would be more like it—but Agnes had exclaimed over the folders that Seven League Tours had sent her. His knowledge of Egypt was limited to vague memories of pictures in which overseers stood sideways on huge blocks of stone and lashed the backs of slaves who toiled at the drag ropes. He wished he had some pictures like that to take home to the union president to illustrate the kind of contract he'd like to negotiate next time for Beasley Builders. It seemed to him that Agnes, now that they had money stashed away, was trying to wean him from his construction-site habits, just as she was making him dress more like the president of a company.

She had not been able to get him to stop wearing his diamond ring. "It's the only thing I got that ain't been mortgaged sometime or other," he told her, "and that includes you, Aggie." He was not unfamiliar with violence—he had battled his way from operating a manual concrete-mixer to the presidency of his own company—and had taken part in and known about practices he hoped were behind him forever. But the idea that someone in this soft, easy-going group intended to kill him was ridiculous. They were pussy cats and he had run with tigers.

Just the same, there were the threats. The first had come two days ago, their first day on the boat. He had come down from the bar to their stateroom to put on the coat that Aggie insisted he wear for dinner, until she found out that he was the only man in the dining room wearing a coat. He found the small red-bordered label pasted to the mirror.

"You will die for the Arena," it read, in the careful lettering of a draftsman. He had clumsily removed it with a razor blade and was about to throw it away when he changed his mind and placed the crumpled slip among his traveling papers, saying nothing to Aggie. The next threat, at lunch yesterday, was not two feet from his face when he looked up from the menu at the tall, grave-faced waiter who held his tray pressed vertically against his robe, its bottom displaying the same

kind of red-margined sticker that read "Remember the Arena."

He took a slug from his glass, captured a handful of peanuts from the bowl, and mentally went down the list of tour members.

"Our tours are limited to twenty persons to give you the best in travel service," Seven League Tours had boasted.

Van Alt, the tour director? Not likely. They had met only three days earlier at the Cairo airport. One thing he had noticed about Van Alt, and Van Alt seemed to know it and to resent him for it, was a lack that should not have been overlooked by an agency that claimed to take care of every detail, and charged accordingly. A complaint could get Van Alt fired, and Beasley had pointed this out to him, more as a casual comment than as a threat.

He was aware too of Van Alt's practice of privately bestowing nicknames on the tour members. His own, of course, was Beastly, and although he regarded it as mild compared with what he had been called over the years, Van Alt's attitude irritated him. Van Alt had referred to Aggie as the Mink Connection, even though she had not brought any of her furs on the trip. Van Alt was smart, but he wasn't smart enough to know that a nickname should not be too accurate. Nor was he smart enough to keep his mouth shut.

But there was no way he could know about the Arena.

Beasley dismissed the women on the tour—twelve, including Aggie. Not even Aggie knew about the Arena; he never discussed matters of this kind with her. He dismissed Aggie too, although he admitted there had been a time when Aggie had had reason for being sore at him. But that was long ago and she wasn't the type to hold a grudge. Anyway, she wouldn't sneak around and paste up little notes. Pick up the nearest thing and fling it at him—that was Aggie's way.

What about that little grey creep—DeWin? Trewin? something like that—sitting by himself with a glass of dry sherry and an even drier-looking book before him? Or that guy Hunter who showed up at breakfast their first day, wearing a jungle shirt and shorts and a white sailor hat turned down all around so that it looked like a sun helmet? Beasley had to admit that Hunter's nickname, Dr. Livingstone, fitted him.

It couldn't be anyone from the four West Coast couples who kept themselves apart from the others as if they were uneasy about associating with anyone who had ever shoveled snow. And certainly it couldn't be that skinny professorlike fellow, Rogers, who was hired by the

agency to keep them standing in the sun while he lectured them on the Middle Kingdom and the old gods and the achievements of ancient architects—a profession which he, as a builder, held in impatient contempt.

Beasley rose from the table to go down to see how Aggie was doing with the bug she seemed to have picked up. Dinner would not interest her, he was certain, nor would she be going ashore to tonight's sound-and-light show at the temple. She would sleep like the dead until morning. He helped himself to the remaining peanuts and, tilting the bowl, he uncovered the sticker on its bottom.

It read: "Soon."

The knocking at the door was insistent but controlled, as though under restraint because of the other passengers. Rogers resisted it, rationalizing that it must be a door other than his or that a crewman was pounding pipes in the overhead. When a vigorous shaking rattled the door, he surrendered and got up to answer it.

Van Alt stood in his pajamas. Behind him was an Egyptian who took pleasure in whatever it was that required people to be aroused at dawn.

"I want you to go with me. Hassan has found a body. He thinks it's someone from our tour."

"Yes. Yes. Your tour. Was in my carriage yesterday," the Egyptian said.

"Who's missing?" Rogers asked. "Surely someone would have reported someone missing by now."

"No one's been reported missing and I can't very well get them all up at this hour to see if anyone is missing."

Rogers saw that Van Alt was shaken and, for some reason, frightened. An experienced tour director who faced with equanimity cancelled flights, the usurpation by oil sheiks of rooms reserved months earlier for his tour, and the even more trying complaints of the tour members, Van Alt would not be expected to be so disturbed by the story the carriage driver had brought him. His was not the only tour on the *Cheops*, so the body might not be his responsibility. On the other hand, he could not afford to assume the driver was wrong.

"I'll meet you at the gangway," Rogers said.

He found the two men waiting beside the watchman and followed

them ashore, climbing the stairs up the sandy bank into the palm-lined boulevard that skirted the river. The grey light that lay over the quiet river and the empty street was already dissolving under the oblique sunrise. The boulevard smelled of yesterday's carriage horses. The air, Rogers noted, was not cool. Rather there was an absence of heat, as though it had not completely cooled during the night and now was lying at some thermal nadir before beginning the climb to the daily hundred-degree mark. The dawn had a used quality as if, like everything else in this strange land, it was already old.

"Hassan says he was on his way to the stables. He lives somewhere on the other side of the temple area and cuts through there to get to the boulevard. I personally think he goes through the temple area to see what's been dropped at the sound-and-light show the night before. He was walking through the forecourt of the temple and when he came to the steps he saw feet sticking out from the base of the obelisk—" Van Alt looked at Hassan.

"One look. Dead. I come straightly to you," Hassan said as if in response to a minor pleasantry.

They turned off the boulevard and entered the long approach to the forecourt of the temple, an avenue flanked by massive statues of rams-headed sphinxes who looked down with a brutish, snouted indifference. At the steps of the forecourt they turned left into an intersecting avenue and were led by Hassan to the foot of the obelisk.

"Like I say. Dead." Hassan smiled cheerfully and pointed.

The body of a man lay in the recess between the base of the obelisk and a low ruined wall. No signs of violence were visible. Van Alt knelt in the sand and jammed his hand against the neck under the angle of the jaw, feeling for a pulse. After a few moments he fumbled for the wrist, dropped it, and placed his hand against the man's chest. The open, lightless eyes told him the same message as the absent pulse. He slid his hand under the back of the man's head, feeling cautiously, and hastily withdrew it, plunging his palm into the sand as though to scour it.

"He's dead," he said, squatting back on his heels. "Beastly's dead."

Rogers tried to suppress the first thought that came to him: Now he won't be able to stand in the back of the group and conduct an independent conversation while I'm lecturing. The expression on Van Alt's face, a growing realization of some liberating relief, made Rogers won-

der if others were not also experiencing untimely and unsuitable thoughts.

Rogers found Van Alt sitting on the top deck in the lengthening shadow of the wheelhouse, seemingly unaware that Rogers stood behind him. When Rogers slid a deck chair next to him, Van Alt roused himself from his preoccupation.

"How did it go?"

"Uneventful. Nobody seemed to miss you. We got to the temple at Abydos, where I gave them the full treatment. We stopped at that gift shop you hate so much and at Abdul's papyrus shop—or I guess it's his uncle's, isn't it? What about Beasley?"

"The autopsy showed a fractured skull. I took Mrs. Beasley to the airport. One of our people in Cairo will put her on the plane for New York and make the other arrangements. But take a look at this."

Van Alt took out an envelope used for airline tickets, from which he extracted a red-bordered label, a fragment of paper whose curled thinness indicated that it had been peeled from something it had been stuck to. On it, in neat hand-lettering, were the words: "You will die for the Arena."

"We were waiting at the airport when she found this. It was in the envelope where Beasley had kept their airline tickets."

There was a familiarity about the label that Rogers tried to place. It was a common-enough sticker. Possibly they used them in the file room at the museum.

"What did Mrs. Beasley say about it?"

"She doesn't know anything about it. She says Beasley never mentioned it to her."

"If it was among his travel papers, it could have been there before he left home. It may have nothing to do with his death in spite of what it says. You'll turn it over to the police, I suppose?"

"Of course. When we get back downriver. I'll let our people there handle it."

"All we really know is that he was threatened—maybe back home, maybe on the tour. The Arena sounds like sports, and that might involve gambling. Maybe Beasley had a bookie he didn't treat with sufficient respect."

"We may never know. Anyway, it isn't my problem any longer."

"How about us?" Rogers asked. "Can our tour leave when the boat does?"

"Of course. I saw Achmed, the hotel manager here. He saw a friend in the city. I spread some of Seven League's money around and we're free to continue upriver."

Rogers marvelled at Van Alt's ability to guide the tour through the thickets that flourish in the path of foreign travel. He admired his unobtrusive patience, his unfailing memory for names and faces, his store of neutral pleasantries. He felt that Van Alt, in dealing with the tour members, projected a hint of some shared assumption, as though he were saying: "Obviously, you and I are men and women of the world, and you are already quite aware of what I am about to tell you, but if I may—" The tourists always felt flattered. He noted that although Van Alt was attentive to the women on the tour, he carefully avoided any attachments. There were already two previous Mrs. Van Alts and a third about to be. He dressed too youthfully for a man who found it necessary to bleach out the streaks of grey that appeared in his blond hair. Rogers observed too that he had a way of suddenly withdrawing, as if some social barrier had been abruptly lowered. And sometimes he felt sure that Van Alt hated Americans.

It would not have occurred to Rogers that his own task on the tour was equally demanding, with lectures sometimes three times a day, covering four thousand years of art, architecture, religion, and history. When the Seven League Tour Agency had approached his museum in search of a lecturer for their Egyptian tour, the museum director had unhesitatingly suggested Rogers as the leading young man in the field. The recommendation had provided him with a paid vacation in the country that had fascinated him ever since he was sixteen and where for one trying and glorious year when he was in graduate school he had worked on a dig.

"What did you find out," Van Alt asked, "about last night?"

"Not much. Most of the tour went to the sound-and-light performance behind the temple. Except for Mrs. Beasley—she was sick—and the four couples from the West Coast. They stayed on the boat and played bridge. Imagine paying Seven League's prices and then spending the time playing bridge."

"Did anyone see Beastly—Beasley, I mean? Did anyone see him leave the sound-and-light show?"

"Not leave, exactly. Trewin, that gloomy fellow who's always reading, said he sat next to him at the show. When they were leaving, going through the temple area, he said you caught up with them so he went on ahead."

"That's right. Beasley was interested in some construction details of the temple. I pointed out a few things. Then Mrs. Murray asked me something and she and I went on ahead."

"Well, everybody who was at the show had to come through the forecourt and down the steps. That means they passed within thirty feet of where Hassan found the body. Maybe Beasley walked back to the temple later, to see it by moonlight or something," Rogers said.

"Maybe, but not likely. He struck me as being a tough customer who wouldn't be given to looking at temples by moonlight."

"I did talk to the watchman on the gangplank," Rogers said. "He told me that everybody came back from the sound-and-light about ten-thirty. Some tourists left the boat again after that, and so did some crew members. The card players were among those who went ashore."

"When did they get back?" Van Alt asked.

"He said they were gone for thirty or forty minutes, just for a walk along the boulevard. I asked them about it. They said they went to that café across from the entrance to the temple area and had a drink. Then there were some people, four or five, who came in around three o'clock. They had been at a nightclub in the Fayd-Al-Farm district. They weren't members of our tour."

"So Beasley wasn't bashed by anyone from our group."

"It doesn't seem likely that he was," Rogers said. "He obviously wasn't going to be assaulted in full view of the people returning from the sound-and-light. And after everyone else was back on the boat except Beasley, it isn't likely—"

"I think Beasley got behind the crowd; somebody delayed him around the forecourt and bashed him. Whether the guilty person is found or not, I've got to put together a good story for the home office."

"Well, good luck. By the way, when do we sail?"

"In the morning."

"In that case I'll get below and study my notes on the temple at Komombo. With interesting observations on mummified crocodiles."

"This tour is creating its own candidates for mummification," Van Alt said.

At the head of the companionway, Rogers turned and called, "Van Alt!"

There was no response from the tour director. He sat unmoving, looking across the river with a faint smile, a smile that reflected more than his usual self-approval.

"Van Alt!" Rogers called again, this time more loudly.

Again there was no answer. At that moment Rogers realized what lay beneath Van Alt's machismo posture, his efforts to sustain a youthful appearance. He was also aware that added credence had been given to the story he had been told that afternoon concerning the events of the previous night, a story in which Van Alt figured but about which he was now understandably silent.

He went down to the main deck and headed for the gangplank, passing the bar where the tour was preparing for dinner. He climbed the waterfront steps to the boulevard, ignoring the hawking carriage drivers, whose animated faces offered sharp contrast to the despondency of their horses. "Halloa! Halloa! See temple in sunset. Cheap. See temple in moon. Cheap." He walked under the palms of the boulevard to the temple area and entered the long avenue of the rams-headed sphinxes which ended at the forecourt of the temple. The obelisk stood opposite the forecourt steps and a dozen yards to the left, surrounded on three sides by a low ruined wall, its pointed top pink in the setting sun. He seated himself on a sun-heated fragment of the wall and studied the spot where Beasley's body had lain.

The sand had been disturbed by many feet, official and unofficial. He tried to recall the scene as he had observed it that morning, with Van Alt testing futilely for vital signs. He remembered Van Alt's swift gesture, his hand plunging into the sand. Getting down on his knees, he probed the sand, turning it over in furrows, lifting it and letting it sift back between his fingers.

At the end of twenty-five minutes he had dug up and felt through the entire area where Beasley's body had lain, and found nothing except an empty box that had contained camera film. He sat down, resting his back against the obelisk, hoping that he offended none of the mighty whose cartouches were carved into the yellow stone, and examined the churned-up area. An inch of clear colorless wire projected from a furrow like some worm of the age of technology. Rogers carefully lifted it from the sand to find at the end of it a dime-sized,

pencil-thick button. Holding it in the palm of his hand, he thought of the years of scientific progress the tiny object represented, and thought too that, in addition to its other capabilities, it would be enough to convict a man of murder.

When Van Alt had asked him about the trip to Abydos that day, Rogers had forgotten to mention that Mrs. Murray had at last begun to unbend.

"I wish my tours consisted only of women like Mrs. Murray," Van Alt had once said to him. "Women who don't get excited when minor setbacks occur, who don't think all foreigners have designs on their bodies or their property, who don't spread gossip, and don't take up early in the tour with people they have to shun for the rest of the tour."

Van Alt was right, Rogers remembered, in another aspect of his analysis of tourist behavior. There were always some tourists who would rather roam through the sleaziest of souvenir stores and subject themselves to the most brazen robbery in the bazaars than see an impressive temple or the most subtle and elegant hieroglyphics. Rogers had watched the tour split into two groups the day when the bus paused in its journey to Abydos. One group went into the roadside souvenir stand that offered the usual pyramids, finger cymbals, beads, and fly whisks. The other had gone into an adjacent shop where Abdul-Amraz demonstrated the ancient art of making paper from the papyrus plant and used his product to prepare cartouches to sell to the tourists. These he made to order, working deftly with his brush and drawing ink to write the names of the customers in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Rogers knew from Van Alt, who prided himself on his extensive knowledge of the people he dealt with, that Abdul was a member of the faculty of the university in Cairo, his field being early Egyptian history. The souvenir shop and the papyrus-making establishment were owned by an uncle who fostered this sideline which employed his nephew's knowledge and also provided him with a much-needed supplement to his academic income. It interested Rogers that so many tourists should be taken with this esoteric communication. True, it was an unusual souvenir, made more unusual in some instances by the words the tourists requested be sketched on their square of papyrus. One of the West Coast people, for example, asked Abdul to draw

"California, here I come," a request that caused Abdul to shake his head in good-natured resignation. But mostly they asked for representations of their own or their children's names.

When the bus was preparing to resume the trip to Abydos, Mrs. Murray climbed aboard, holding out a wet sheet of papyrus inscribed with a cartouche.

"That's my name in the cartouche," she said to Rogers as she seated herself beside him. "Or so he says. The thing I like about it is that no one will ever be able to get it into a computer."

Rogers examined the papyrus. Abdul had inked an oblong border within which a short horizontal zigzag line was drawn over what looked like the branch of a tree. This was followed by a flattened oval, resembling a mouth.

"I don't know if it's my name or not," she said, "and I don't think it matters, because when I get it home nobody will be able to prove it's not."

"Well, this is an R," Rogers said, pointing to the picture of the mouth. "Certainly there are enough R's in Murray to make you think Abdul is close."

"My first name is Ruth."

"This zigzag line means 'water' and this other figure, the branch, means 'wood.' Are you sure your name isn't R. Waterwood?"

She laughed. It was apparent that she was becoming more relaxed in her relations with him and some of the others on the tour. For the first several days she had maintained a friendly reserve. She spoke when spoken to, responding politely, but did nothing to sustain conversation. In this he thought he detected a resemblance to the silent Trewin—possibly as a result of their common New England background. If he remembered the tour data correctly, they both came from Massachusetts. In any case, now that the group had been together for a week Mrs. Murray's reserve was diminishing, especially insofar as Trewin was concerned. Twice they had had drinks together and several times Rogers had seen them chatting at the rail while the *Cheops* pushed upriver.

Mrs. Murray asked him a few questions on the nature of hieroglyphics and then led him into an account of how he had gotten into Egyptology. He found himself talking freely, and not for some time did he realize that she was informing herself about his life without revealing

the slightest detail of her own. He determined to break the pattern.

"I suppose your husband was prevented from accompanying you?"

"My husband died fifteen years ago in a fall from a horse. We ran a riding school. We bought this horse we knew very little about and—" She fell silent.

"Do you still run the school?"

"No. I tried operating it for two years by myself but I gave it up and opened a shop specializing in riding clothes and riding equipment. I was just thinking how different my place is from that shop we just left."

"I suppose I shouldn't tell you this, but I suspect that Abdul's uncle, who owns the shop, kicks back something to the agency. I don't know the arrangements. I know that Van Alt hates the whole shopping aspect of these trips, but the agency is convinced the customers want it."

"Some do," she agreed. "But not every tour can provide a murder."

"We do our best."

"It sounds harsh, I know," she said, her face turned away toward the desert bordering their route, "but in my opinion, Mr. Beasley's death was a small loss."

"I know who killed Beasley," Hunter said.

He had dropped into the bus seat beside Rogers vacated by Mrs. Murray. His voice was portentous, as if he were awed at finding himself the possessor of such information, and at the same time he appeared eager, as if he were unaccustomed to having his statements regarded seriously and was pleased to be in a situation where his words would receive weight. Rogers observed his khaki shorts and knee-length stockings. A forty-five-year-old boy scout, he thought.

"Who killed him?"

Hunter glanced over his shoulder to check that the seat behind them was empty.

"Last night when we got back to the boat after the sound-and-light performance, I found that I had left my fly whisk behind. I recalled looping it over the back of the chair in front of me, so I went back to the temple and found the row and the chair where I had been sitting, but there was no fly whisk. It's nothing to make a fuss about, I suppose, but I had come to regard it as a good-luck piece."

"What bearing does—" Rogers began.

"I'm coming to that. I was about to go down the steps of the forecourt into that cross street or whatever when the lights went out. They were a sketchy arrangement anyway—naked bulbs at irregular intervals—but when I reached the street in front of the forecourt steps I could see, in the moonlight, two people coming behind me through the temple itself. I stepped back into the shadows until I could see who they were. They stopped on the steps. Van Alt and Beasley.

"I don't like the way you're running this tour, Van Alt,' I heard Beasley say. 'You're a lousy tour director.'

"I am regarded as the best tour director in Egypt,' Van Alt said.

"That's what you say,' Beasley said. 'Why do you give Aggie the brush-off when she asks you questions about when to be ready for the bus and things like that? You don't answer. I invite you for a drink at my table and you pass me by like I'm not there. Maybe the others will put up with stuff like that, but you ain't going to pull it on Aggie and you ain't going to pull it on me. A tour that costs this much dough ought to be run by a person who can hear when somebody talks to him.'

"What are you talking about, you stupid Yank?' Van Alt says. 'Of course I can hear.'

"Yeah? Well, O.K., then,' Beasley goes on, 'let me tell you what I'm going to do. When I get home I'm going to complain to the Seven League Tour Agency about you. How do they get away charging such high prices and then give us a director who is hard of hearing? The least they'll do is make you take a hearing examination. Then let's see if they renew your contract.'

Hunter paused, and then continued.

"Beasley said a couple of words I won't repeat and continued down the steps. I think he made the wrong turn because he went toward the obelisk. Van Alt ran after him and they disappeared behind the obelisk. I could hear a scuffle, then Van Alt reappeared, came back toward the steps, and turned into the main avenue. He was almost running."

"But I don't see that—" Rogers began.

"Beasley was found at the base of that obelisk, wasn't he? The place where I heard them struggling? Van Alt must have hit him on the head and killed him."

"Hit him with what?"

"That's what I'm leading up to. My fly whisk originally had an ebony handle, covered with leather braiding. Some time ago I had the wood replaced by an iron bar twelve inches long and the leather rebraided over it. That fly whisk was more dangerous than any blackjack."

"So?"

"When Van Alt came back past my hiding place, he was carrying my fly whisk."

"I know who killed Beasley," Van Alt said, making the statement in the same off-hand confident manner with which he related triumphs over hotels and airlines. Rogers did not ask the obvious question, knowing that Van Alt would proceed.

"The first night going upriver, I came up here on deck, partly to avoid the tour—they always stay inside with the air-conditioning—and partly to watch the river. I saw Hunter sitting where you are now. He saw that I had seen him so I couldn't very well not acknowledge that he was there, and I sat down to chat with him for a few minutes.

"This is my last trip to Africa," he said as if we had been discussing African trips for an hour. I made some noncommittal reply.

"I can't afford these trips any more," he said. "I've lost all my money." Then he blurted out, "I'm going to have to go to work."

"I was about to offer some tongue-in-cheek condolence—I've been working ever since I was seventeen—but he went on. 'My grandmother left me some money,' he said. 'Enough so I could live on the income. But I've spent most of it on travel. I'm deeply interested in Africa, especially Egypt and the Sudan. This is the second time I have taken this Nile cruise.'

"Eventually he explained the details of the disastrous transaction. He'd met a man at his broker's office, a man he had seen around but didn't know well. This man put him in touch with a newly organized company that was going to construct a gambling casino and hotel somewhere on one of the Caribbean islands. There were three principal stockholders and because they needed additional capital they were willing to take in smaller investors. Hunter's lawyer advised against the idea but Hunter went ahead anyway. He liquidated the assets his grandmother had left him and put everything into the new company—Insulae Unlimited."

"I think I can see what's coming," Rogers said.

- "Right. The casino was about half finished when Insulae ran out of money. They had paid everything they had to the construction company, which had run into all sorts of unforeseen obstacles in the course of construction—at least that's what they said. Insulae went into bankruptcy and Hunter got paid off at about five cents on the dollar. The land, and the half-built casino were bought by a new company that went ahead and finished the project with the same builders.

"The upshot is that Hunter helped pay for the casino but never got to own any part of it. The three principal stockholders claimed to have suffered just as much as Hunter and the other minor holders, but Hunter's sure they conspired with the building company to swindle him."

"But how do you tie this in with Beasley's murder?"

"I have an old friend. We used to be guides for the same company. He's become some kind of a social director for the hotel that the successor company to Insulae put up. He was planning to leave and wanted to know if I'd be interested in taking over his job. He told me that the construction company involved in the bankruptcy was owned by a man named Beasley."

"But it isn't likely that Hunter would know about Beasley."

"Maybe he didn't. But I think he did know who was behind the swindle. The other day when we were at one of those bus stops on the field trip, Hunter spilled a whole string of credit cards out of his wallet. I helped him pick them up and among them was a business card. The name caught my eye. Beasley Builders—Sam Beasley, President."

"So here he is on the same tour with the man who defrauded him. It's a big coincidence," Rogers said.

"If it is a coincidence. You have to admit he had a motive."

"But why would he tell you about losing his money because of Beasley if he intended to kill him? It seems to me he wouldn't mention a word about any connection with Beasley."

"He didn't. He never mentioned Beasley's name—nor the name of Insulae, for that matter. I made that connection. I doubt that Beasley knew Hunter had lost money on one of his buildings. And there was no way for Hunter to know that I knew Beasley was the builder for Insulae. Or that I knew anything at all about Insulae. And there is one other thing."

"Well?"

"I described Hunter to the watchman who was on duty at the gangplank that night. With that outfit of his he's conspicuous. I asked him if he had seen anyone dressed like that return to the boat that night, and, if so, when. He said Hunter came back at the same time as the others, then he went ashore again directly and didn't return for thirty or forty minutes. What more do you want? He's got a motive and he's not accounted for during the period the murder occurred. It's got to be Hunter who killed Beasley."

Van Alt, Rogers thought, in addition to proclaiming himself the best tour director in Egypt, was now establishing himself as the best detective.

Or possibly the best liar.

"What are you reading, Mr. Trewin?" Rogers asked as he stopped at the table where Trewin was sitting alone in the bar. "May I sit down?"

"Please do." Trewin cleared his throat as if reluctantly preparing himself for something. "It's Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*."

"Appropriate in view of what happened last night," Rogers said, and thought how appropriate the title was for Trewin as well. His somber suit, dark frayed tie, and black-edged eyeglasses made him a reserved and gloomy figure in contrast to the easy-going, easy-laughing casualness of his countrymen. Once the others became aware of Trewin's demonstrated desire to be let alone, they no longer paid any attention to him, so that he became like some fixture on the tour, a bus driver or a waiter, who is noticed, if at all, only in a cursory fashion. The exception, of course, was Mrs. Murray, who had been seen having drinks with him and chatting with him on deck.

Trewin passed the book to Rogers who, not knowing what to do with it, idly riffled through the pages. He noted that Trewin, or somebody, had underlined many passages. Trewin had fashioned a bookplate which, like so much about him, had a home-made quality and imparted a purse-mouthed, bookkeeperish accountability that may also have been indicative of its owner: "This book is the property of Thomas Trewin."

"Could you shed any light on last night's events?" Rogers asked, passing the book back. The waiter placed a drink before Trewin. Anticipating Trewin's hesitant invitation, he waved the waiter away. Trewin, he noted with interest, was drinking doubles and, judging by the

number of glasses on the table, he was now on his fourth. Maybe the reclusive Trewin was not as self-sufficient as it might appear.

"Very little. You are interested, I assume, in my movements. I sat with Beasley at the sound-and-light show. We walked partway out together and then Van Alt overtook us. I left them and walked ahead to the boulevard and had coffee at that little café opposite the entrance to the temple complex. A little later, maybe ten or fifteen minutes, I can't be sure, I saw Van Alt come out of the temple grounds. About five minutes after that, I saw that Dr. Livingstone fellow, the one who always carries that horsetail, come out. I came back to the boat a little after that myself."

His lips twisted bleakly, as though he enjoyed not being able to provide information, but then Rogers was surprised when he added gratuitously, "I know something about the building business. I knew Beasley by reputation. I'm surprised someone didn't do away with him long before this."

A general approximation, Rogers thought, of what Van Alt knew about the man who had poured Hunter's money into his concrete mixers. Insofar as Trewin himself was concerned, Rogers concluded that the most mysterious thing about him was why he was on the cruise at all.

He had nothing solid to go on, Rogers admitted to himself, but this wasn't a court. It was a cruise where people were supposed to enjoy themselves and not end up lying before a monument with a shattered head. He had motives and some evidence perhaps, and also some suggestions that might point the way to the truth, but he could prove nothing. He couldn't even convince himself. Sometimes he was certain it was Van Alt, other times he was sure it was the strangely immature Hunter. And now he was wondering whether the solemn Trewin was involved. While the real assailant could be hundreds of miles down the river, traceless in some teeming bazaar.

He dismissed the thought. Knowing, and not caring too much, that he would lose his job if he accused the wrong person, he was determined to confront Van Alt, Hunter, and Trewin with what he knew. He had asked Van Alt to get them together, which he did without objection—which was not his customary way of treating Rogers' suggestions.

We're meeting in a frivolous place for a deadly serious purpose, Rogers thought as he waited for the others at a table in the ship's lounge. The air-conditioning, the brightly colored awnings, the splashing and laughter from the pool on the other side of the sliding glass doors all made this a place where shipboard friendships were begun, to last until the following Christmas when cards would be exchanged between already barely remembered people.

Van Alt was already present, his face showing strain. He passed an airlines envelope from one hand to the other and finally slapped it down on the table in frustration.

Hunter arrived and seated himself, placing his fly whisk on the table and following it with his white hat, which he deposited with a ceremonial flourish. Trewin came in from the brilliant morning sun, waited until his eyes adjusted to the lounge's dimness, and took his place, regarding the others soberly and looking as though he would prefer to be left in peace to read the book which he laid before him on the table.

"Mr. Van Alt has asked you to meet with us to see if we can't sort out the facts relating to the—" Rogers groped lamely for a way to avoid the blunt harshness of the word "—death of Sam Beasley. You were asked to bring certain items that might be of help. Mr. Van Alt has brought evidence which he will reveal at the proper time. And you, Mr. Trewin, have brought what was requested. Mr. Hunter has brought his fly whisk." (His sixteen ounces of iron pipe, Rogers thought, his lethal, home-handyman blackjack.)

"First of all," he said, "Mr. Hunter. You had a motive. Beasley's construction company used up your investment and left you broke. And you had a weapon." He pointed to the fly whisk, its black horse-hair glittering on the table. "A weapon you always carried with you, that you said you left behind at the sound-and-light performance. I see it has been returned."

"I found it hanging from the doorknob of my stateroom door. And I know who put it there." Hunter gestured toward Van Alt. "He did."

"That's right, I did," Van Alt said. "I found it hanging on the back of a chair at the sound-and-light show. You left it behind and I returned it, that's all."

"Not quite all," Rogers said. "Hunter, will you repeat what you told me?"

Hunter related the argument he had overheard on the steps of the

forecourt—how he had seen Van Alt follow Beasley toward the obelisk where the body had been found, how he heard the sounds of conflict. “To me it’s open and shut,” Hunter concluded. “Van Alt hit him with my fly whisk.”

“Did you *see* it? Did you see me *hit him*?” Van Alt’s face was white with anger.

“No,” Hunter replied. “I didn’t actually see you. But it’s obvious. He was going to cause you to lose your job. You did follow him to the spot where the crime was committed, and you did have a weapon in your hand.”

“Van Alt, you do admit, don’t you,” Rogers asked, “that there was a struggle? Be careful how you answer. Look at this.” Rogers set on the table a small beige-colored button to which a short length of colorless plastic-covered wire was attached.

“This is your hearing aid, Van Alt. You don’t wear it in the daytime when it can be readily seen. I submit that you and Beasley had a struggle and that this got torn loose. When you examined his body that morning, you found something under Beasley’s head, something you pushed down into the sand.”

Van Alt did not look at the tiny device, as though refusing to acknowledge its existence.

“O.K. I punched—or I tried to punch—Beasley. He was going to cost me my job. Who wants a tour director who can’t hear, even if he is the best tour director in Egypt? But Beasley was a lot more experienced in physical encounters than I am.”

“Then you *were* wearing—”

“My hearing aid. Yes. It *was* pulled loose. I *did* feel it under his head. I *did* try to cover it with sand.” Van Alt leaped to his feet and swore, bending across the table and shouting into Rogers’ face. “You don’t laugh at people who have lost their sight, do you? Then is there something amusing about people who can’t hear?”

He regained control of himself and sank back into his chair. “I admit that Beasley and I had a brief tussle. But I never hit him with that.” He glanced at Hunter’s fly whisk. “Nor with anything else. And nobody can prove I did.”

“That’s right,” Rogers said. “Nobody can prove you did. May I have that envelope I asked you to bring?”

Van Alt passed him the airlines envelope from which Rogers with-

drew the red-edged label bearing the warning: "You will die for the Arena." Using a paper napkin to avoid smudging the lettering, he smoothed the fragile bit of paper on the table.

"Now may I have your book, Mr. Trewin?"

With a shrug, Trewin passed *The Anatomy of Melancholy* across the table to him. Rogers opened the front cover of the book and laid it beside the warning message.

Pasted inside the front cover was Trewin's bookplate, a red-edged label identical with that which Beasley had scraped from his mirror, and bearing in similar, precise, draftsmanlike lettering the words: "This book is the property of Thomas Trewin."

The three looked at Trewin, expecting him to dismiss the similarity between the warning label and his homemade bookplate by pointing out that red-edged labels were used by the millions, that draftsmen's lettering was so uniform as to be untraceable to an individual. But Trewin only gave a slight twist to his thin lips, and his dour self-effacing gloom changed to a brooding menace.

"Do you want to explain this to us, Mr. Trewin?" Rogers asked.

"So you're the one," Van Alt said. "You killed him."

"Beasley was going to die," Trewin said grimly. "I wanted him to know it."

"I'm a product of the Depression," Trewin began. "After high school I couldn't go on to study to be an architect as I'd always hoped. I got a job, after eighteen months of looking—a job driving a tank truck delivering acid to chemical plants. Then the war came and I was in the Army engineers. Specifications, design, and so forth. Anyway, I liked it because I was building something. When I got out, I sold building materials. I was a terrible salesman but there was such a demand I became good enough to open my own business and hire salesmen. It was a successful operation but I didn't really like it. It was as close, however, as I was ever going to get to being an architect, to building.

"My sister's husband died suddenly, leaving her with a ten-year-old daughter, Eve. I had designed and built myself a house, where I lived alone, so I asked my sister and Eve to come and live with me. Eve was like a daughter to me—I loved her dearly."

Trewin stopped and stared out of the dimness of the lounge at the glaring sand on the other side of the river.

"We all got along well together and the time drifted by. In no time, it seemed, Eve had become a lovely young woman, ready to go off to the university. She was an excellent student. When she was completing her sophomore year she told us that she had decided to go to the architectural school. I was extremely pleased and did everything I could, encouraging her, helping with expenses. I never once mentioned how tough I thought it would be for a woman architect in what is still, in my opinion, a hide-bound profession.

"When Eve came home for Christmas during her last year in architectural school, she announced that she had been offered a job with Rock, Gibbings, and Elston, one of the big architectural firms in the city. We were overjoyed and it appeared that my ambitions were being realized through Eve. I think that Christmas was the happiest of our lives. I know it was our last happy one.

"It had snowed all day, then thawed, and after that we had a quick freeze. On top of it there came a long, heavy rain. Eve had been seeing a young man who was home on vacation from college and that night they went to a basketball game in the city. During the game, the roof of the sports arena collapsed and seven people were killed. Eve was one of them.

"I can't describe how shattered our lives were, the sudden pointlessness of everything. I had not realized how much of my old ambition had been transferred to Eve.

"My sister and I went through the motions of daily living, but the light had gone out of our lives. Then, about a year later, my sister received a letter. Here, let me show you."

Trewin took out a much-handled piece of paper, held together at the folds with tape, and handed it to Rogers.

Room 404
Valley Hospital

Dear Mrs. Strong:

Would it be possible for you to come to the hospital to see me? I am told that I have only a short time left and there is something on my conscience I must ask your forgiveness for, if forgiveness is possible after what I have done.

Very truly yours,
Edward Brennan

Rogers set the letter on the table and whispered to Van Alt, who looked at him doubtfully, shrugged, and left the lounge.

"Neither of us had heard of this man," Trewin said, "but we decided I should visit him and see what he wanted. . ."

He had expected, Trewin explained, to find a man on his deathbed. Instead, Brennan was sitting at the window of the dim hospital room in the early winter twilight, his eyes sunken and troubled and his lips purple, waiting.

"There is something I must explain to Mrs. Strong," Brennan said when Trewin explained who he was. "I'm trying to explain it to all of them. I don't have much time left. And there are others on the list. That list. That dreadful list."

"I don't know what you mean," Trewin said. "What list?"

"It was in the papers. I can see it every time I close my eyes. 'Albert Casseres, 19; Donald McFall, 28—'"

"Those are the names of the others who died when the arena roof collapsed," Trewin broke in.

"—J. Oliver, 26; Arlene Romero, 21—"

Brennan's voice had dropped to a monotone. His eyes closed.

"—Brian Smith, 16; Robert Smith, 14; Eve Strong, 23.'"

Brennan opened his eyes, looked briefly and hopelessly at Trewin, and shifted his gaze back to the window as though unable to face his visitor with what he was about to say.

"I killed them. I killed them all." His voice shook and he covered his face with brown-spotted hands.

Trewin waited, sensing that whatever this man's connection with Eve's death had been, there was no doubt that he believed his guilt to be real. Trewin sensed too, within himself, the spark of an idea, a hope that maybe after the months of anguish and loss over Eve's death, there was something—he didn't yet know what—he could do about it.

"I was a building inspector for the city," Brennan said. "My job was to check on the safety of new construction. The Sports Arena was one of my assignments. I want to explain that I wasn't some incompetent hack filling a job the clubhouse had found for him. I'm a trained engineer and when I took the city job I'd had years of experience in designing steel-frame buildings.

"The arena had been designed by a reliable engineering firm I had

worked for in my early days. The roof design involved space-frame trusses, a kind of latticework arrangement of steel that would distribute weight in all directions."

"I know something about them," Trewin said.

"When the roof was finished, I knew it wasn't right. I went up there after a heavy rain and I found ponding. If construction isn't carefully done, you get depressed areas in the roof and in a heavy rain the water doesn't drain as it should—it just lies there like a pond and adds a burden of weight to the roof. It was out of the question that I should pass on the building until this condition was corrected. I discussed it at the office and somehow word got out that the arena wasn't going to be approved."

"One day I arrived home to find a car parked in my driveway, a big expensive car. A man got out and walked back to meet me.

"I'm Sam Beasley," he said. 'I'd like to talk to you.'

"He came around to the other side of my car and sat beside me in the front seat. I won't go into everything he said, but the gist of it was that the arena roof had cost nine hundred and eighty thousand dollars to construct, and would cost another hundred and fifty thousand to correct. He laid an envelope on the seat between us and said it had fourteen thousand dollars in it. It was mine if I approved the building as it was."

He stopped, took a pill box from his pocket, shook out two tablets, and washed them down, the water glass shaking in his hand.

"I can't justify what I did. I took the money. I took it because that was what I had always done since I started to work for the city. I had to turn some of it over, but nevertheless I took it. I *could* have insisted that the roof be fixed and nobody would have opposed me, not publicly anyway. But I took the money. And seven young people died. Two thousand dollars each.

"That roof was designed for thirty pounds per square foot of live load. You remember that we had that heavy snow, a brief thaw, then a freeze followed by unusually heavy rain. So we had the snow load plus the weight of the ponded water, creating an unusual stress. The structural members might have held under either stress separately, but they couldn't hold under both and the roof collapsed."

"What is it you want from us?" Trewin asked.

"If the girl's mother could come to see me, if I could try to convince

her I didn't mean harm to her daughter. I just went along with the system. I can't die with this terrible guilt."

Trewin thought for several minutes before he said, "No, she won't be coming here. I'll tell her what you told me, but she won't be coming here."

"Please, if you knew what it's like, sitting here facing—"

"Mr. Brennan, there were seven young people killed in the collapse of that roof. Have the families of any of the others answered your letter?"

"No, none. People don't understand the necessity for forgiveness."

Brennan turned away and stared out into the dark which now waited on the other side of the window. Trewin stood and made his way through the hospital corridors toward the elevators, taking with him a new idea of death.

"I hired a detective agency to learn about Beasley's movements," Trewin told Rogers. "They tracked down somebody on Beasley's secretarial staff. That's how I found out about this trip the Beasleys were planning—and, as you see, I managed to get on the same tour."

Van Alt pushed open the sliding door from the deck and followed Mrs. Murray into the lounge. Her reaction on seeing the group was pleasantly curious, as if instead of meeting the garden-club ladies she expected, their husbands had appeared. She sat down and placed before her the square of papyrus bearing the hieroglyphics Abdul had drawn.

"Good morning, gentlemen," she said. "This looks like a summit conference. Although I brought this papyrus, as requested, I refuse to serve as recording secretary."

"Mr. Trewin here has been telling us about his actions on the night of the murder," Rogers began, "and we thought—"

"Has he indeed?"

"We thought you might be able to help us. But let's have Mr. Trewin finish his story."

"I was determined," Trewin went on, "that Beasley should know he was going to die—and why. There would be no justice in Beasley going out and not knowing why. I also felt some justice in threatening him with those labels during the tour, especially when he was supposed to be enjoying himself."

"I had worked out a number of careful plans for killing him. But it was almost impossible to get him alone. I thought an opportunity might occur on our way to the sound-and-light show. I fell in beside him and said that since we were both involved in building we had a lot in common. This interested him and he indicated that I might not be the nonentity he had thought. We sat together during the performance and started to walk back together after it was over. I deliberately hung back so that the crowd would move on ahead of us. We were the last to leave the sound-and-light area and stopped on the forecourt steps to discuss the span lengths the Egyptians were able to get from limestone when we met Van Alt."

Van Alt made a swift movement of his eyebrows, as if to say, "Now listen to this."

"He said he could show us one of the longest still in place—twenty feet, he estimated, from column top to column top. I often wondered what those people could have built if they had had steel. And crooked building inspectors."

"As long as Van Alt was there, I wasn't going to be able to do anything about Beasley, so I excused myself and went on ahead toward the boulevard. I left just in time because as I came out of the boulevard the lights in the temple area went out. I crossed the boulevard and sat in that café where the carriages are and ordered coffee. In about ten or fifteen minutes I saw Van Alt come out of the temple area and head down the boulevard toward the boat landing. He was carrying that." He pointed to Hunter's fly whisk. "It occurred to me that this was the opportunity I had been waiting for. I was about to cross the boulevard and reenter the temple area when I saw you"—he looked at Hunter—"come out of the area. A tourist carriage turned into the avenue of the sphinxes. I waited until it had turned the corner at the forecourt steps and gone out of sight. I was sure the place was now deserted, that nobody but Beasley remained behind, and I went in to find—and to kill—Beasley."

"In the moonlight everything was either brightly lit or in deep shadow. As I walked along the avenue with all those statues looking down at me, I thought of the thousands of moonlit nights that had passed over this place since it had been built. I wondered if others before me had entered the sacred premises with murder in their hearts."

"If you think, after all I've said, that I killed Beasley, you're wrong."

When I reached the steps of the forecourt, I saw him. He was lying at the foot of the obelisk, between it and the remains of a wall. Somebody had already done what I came to do."

"Ask Hassan to come in," said Rogers.

Hassan entered, wearing a long white robe and the red Nubian cap, tall, slender, and serious. He saluted the group gravely, according Mrs. Murray an extra flicker of respect. He placed on the table a heavy package wrapped scantily in newspaper, and stood back, looking expectantly at Rogers. Rogers in turn looked at Van Alt, who, with a wave of his hand, indicated that he should proceed.

"Hassan came to us this morning with this story: And although he understands the language well enough, he would rather I tell you what he told us.

"This morning he was cleaning out his carriage when he noticed something about that"—he pointed at the package—"which made him realize he knew more about Beasley's murder than he thought. He hurried to the boat to catch us before we sailed. On the night of the murder Hassan was waiting outside the temple area in front of the café to see if he couldn't pick up some of the people returning from the sound-and-light show and drive them through the temple area and along the boulevard for a view of the river. About half an hour after the sound-and-light was over, a fare got into his carriage and asked to be driven through the temple grounds. Before they moved off, the passenger asked Hassan to go into the café and get cigarettes, and to have a drink of some kind for himself."

Hassan nodded solemnly.

"When he came back, his carriage was gone. One of the other drivers said he had seen it turning into the temple grounds. Hassan was concerned because these carriages are owned by a concessionaire and if any damage was done, he would lose his job. But he waited, and in about fifteen minutes his horse and carriage drove up in front of the café with no harm done, and Hassan was given a big tip—the equivalent of a full week's earnings."

Hassan shrugged, as though dismissing hyperbole.

"This package Hassan brought with him today contains a concrete building block, the kind that has two apertures running through it from top to bottom. It weighs, I should judge, between fifteen and twenty

pounds. A five- or six-foot length of rope is tied to the block and the other end is snapped to the horse's bridle. The block is placed on the ground near the horse's forelegs and its weight discourages him from moving very far. The drivers carry them in their carriages and use them when they can't hitch to a tree. In the old days, the hitching block used to be a solid, conical piece of iron, made especially for the purpose. But what attracted Hassan's attention was this."

Rogers carefully unwrapped the newspaper and set the block up on end. One end was smeared with blackened stains.

"Tell them, Hassan."

With patriarchal dignity, his flowing sleeve dropping away from his thin arm, Hassan pointed at Mrs. Murray.

"This lady. She take my carriage."

Trewin looked at her with puzzled amazement, Hunter with startled awe.

"What nonsense! Yes, I took the carriage. But I didn't kill anyone," Mrs. Murray said.

"But what could be a weapon, one with bloodstains on it, was found in the carriage you made off with," Rogers pointed out.

"The explanation is simple," she said. "Except that." She pointed to the concrete block. "I can't explain that. What happened was that when we returned from the sound-and-light, I didn't feel ready to get back on board. It was a lovely night, with a full moon. I wanted to go back into the temple area where I could see it alone. I walked back to that café where the carriages wait and arranged with one of the drivers—it had occurred to me that the driver himself could become a nuisance, so I gave him some money to go into the café and get himself cigarettes and a drink. As soon as he was gone, I climbed up on the driver's seat, picked up the reins, and drove into the temple grounds. But I didn't kill anyone. What reason would I have to kill a man I'd never seen until a few days before in Cairo?"

"May I have that letter?" Rogers asked Trewin. "The one your sister received from the building inspector. And your papyrus, Mrs. Murray."

He placed the letter on the table before him and held the square of papyrus up for all to see, feeling, as he did so, his lecture manner returning.

"This papyrus with the cartouche sketched on it was bought by Mrs.

Murray at Abdul's shop the day we went to the temple at Abydos. The first character, this horizontal zigzag line, is the symbol for water. The next character, the one here under the first one which looks like a tree branch, is the symbol for wood. The last character, here on the right, looks like a mouth and has the phonetic value of R. These are phonograms, in this case representing consonants in the ancient language of Egypt. The zigzag line stands for N and the tree branch stands for HT. These hieroglyphics may be translated as N, H, T, R."

Van Alt stirred in his chair. "This is no time to be giving a lecture on the meaning of hieroglyphics," he muttered.

The others said nothing. Mrs. Murray was quietly attentive, Trewin somber and tense. Hunter reached to pick up his fly whisk, changed his mind, and hastily withdrew his hand.

"Mrs. Murray, you said that you asked Abdul to write your name in hieroglyphics."

"Yes, I did."

"Hieroglyphics are generally read from right to left," Rogers explained. "So the cartouche on your papyrus would show 'R' for your first initial. I think you said your first name is Ruth."

Mrs. Murray nodded.

"The consonants N, H, and T formed the word which meant 'strong' in ancient Egyptian. The name you gave to Abdul, from habit, without thinking, was your full name, Ruth Strong—the same Mrs. Strong to whom this letter was addressed. The mother of Eve Strong, who died when Beasley's roof collapsed."

He held up Trewin's worn letter which opened downward on a hinge of tape.

"You and Trewin are sister and brother. The two of you came on this trip to kill Beasley. Trewin has already admitted his intention. I submit that one of you succeeded—you, Mrs. Murray."

The lounge was silent. Outside, the deckhands were casting off the mooring lines. The ship trembled faintly. The loudspeaker warned.

"I succeeded," Mrs. Murray said tersely. "I got tired of waiting for Tom. He was too cautious. Luck is better than careful planning. And I was lucky."

"I had just driven the carriage around the corner into the cross street in front of the forecourt steps. I saw Beasley sitting there alone. I stopped the carriage and asked him if he would like to ride with me

through the temple area. At first he seemed hesitant, and then shrugged his shoulders as if surprised that someone was offering to share something with him on an open, friendly basis. As Beasley bent his head looking for the step to climb up beside me, I hit him."

"With what?"

"With what was at hand. That." She pointed at the building block. "It was on the floor under the driver's seat. He fell, but he wasn't dead. I dragged him into that alcovelike place between the obelisk and the wall. I climbed up on the wall and dropped the block on his head from there—about nine feet, I think. Whatever it was, it was enough. There was no question this time. I put the hitching block back into the carriage, continued along the cross street until I was free of the temple area, turned left, and made it back to the boulevard. Hassan was waiting there, very excited, but I tried to convince him the horse had gotten out of control."

"How did you get back on the boat? The watchman didn't mention your coming back."

"The bridge players were just coming back from a walk on the boulevard. I just followed them up the gangplank. The watchman would assume we were all together. Eight people left for a walk. Nine came back."

"Now what do we do?" Van Alt asked. "We've got a confessed murderer on the tour, and her accomplice."

The *Cheops* moved upriver, the palm-fringed boulevard, Hassan, and the waiting carriages six hours behind. The river banks were thin strips of green behind which the immense and pitiless desert waited. The tour had halted briefly in mid-morning to inspect a lonely ruin, with the *Cheops* uneasily nosed against the sandy bank below the tawny temple columns that waited for the desert to cover them once more.

"It's the duty of the tour director to see that all tour members who depart on side trips return from them," Rogers said. "If that isn't a quote from the Tour Director's Guide, it ought to be. When we stopped two hours ago at the temple ruins, did everybody get back on the boat?"

"I didn't check. They'd better have. There's nothing here but river and desert."

"Mrs. Murray—Ruth Strong—and Thomas Trewin didn't," Rogers said.

"What do you mean?" said Van Alt in alarm. "Why didn't you tell me? I've got to get to the ship's radio!"

"Wait. When we visited the temple ruins at the last stop, I was the last to leave and come down to the boat. The place seemed empty and I was about to start down the bank when I saw Mrs. Murray and Trewin walking away from the temple and the river. They were heading east, into the desert. I called to them and started after them. They indicated I should go back to the boat and kept walking."

"Heading into the desert!" Van Alt exclaimed. "But they won't last—"

"Probably not. But survival wasn't their intention. What was their alternative? You would have turned them in when we got back downriver. The law is the law whether it's one's own country or another's. They were sentencing themselves."

Van Alt thought for a long time. His face cleared and he nodded.

"This tour," he said. "A man murdered. The two people involved in it turn up missing. Yet everything is in order, nothing more needs to be done, and—" his voice rose as if in a bright and happy conclusion suddenly arrived at "—none of it can be blamed on me. I am still the best tour director in Egypt."

Rogers was silent. We must not break another man's ego bowl, he thought.



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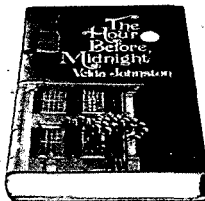
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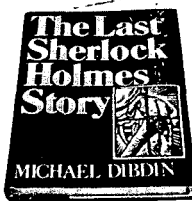
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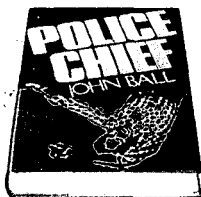
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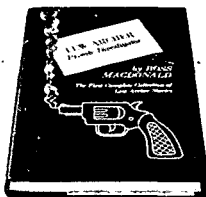
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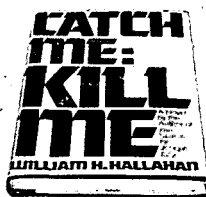
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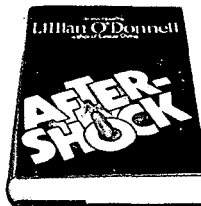
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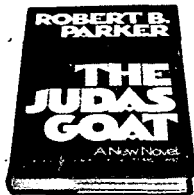
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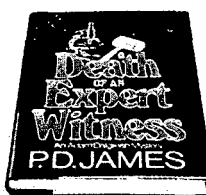
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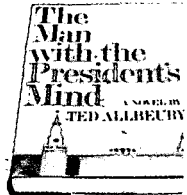
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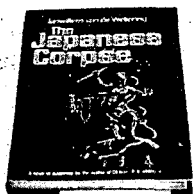
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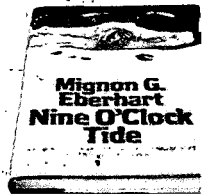
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